KEPT IN THE DARK

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KEPT IN THE DARK

A NOVEL

BY

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

IN TWO VOLUMES

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OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

KEPT IN THE DARK.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. WESTERN PREPARES TO LEAVE.

CECILIA, when she first read her husband's letter, did not clearly understand it. It could not be that he intended to leave her for ever! They had been married but a few months,—a few months of inexpressible love and confidence; and it was impossible that he should intend that they should be thus parted. But when she had read it again and again, she began to perceive that it was so; 'Pray believe it. We have now parted for ever.' Had he stopped there her belief would have only been half-

hearted. She would not in truth have thought that he had been in earnest in dooming her to eternal separation. But he had gone on with shocking coolness to tell her how he had arranged his plans for the future. 'Half my income you shall have.' 'You shall live here in this house, if it be thought well for you.' 'Your lawyer had better see my lawyers.' It was, in truth, his intention that it should be so. And she had already begun to have some knowledge of the persistency of his character. She was already aware that he was a man not likely to be moved from his word. He had gone, and it was his intention to go. And he had declared with a magnanimity which she now felt to be odious, and almost mean, what liberal arrangements he had made for her maintenance. She was in no want of income. She told herself that she would rather starve in the street than eat his bread, unless she might eat it

from the same loaf with him; that she would rather perish in the cold than enjoy the shelter of his roof, unless she might enjoy it with him.

There she remained the whole day by herself, thinking that something must occur to mitigate the severity of the sentence which he had pronounced against her. It could not be that he should leave her thus,—he whose every word, whose every tone, whose every look, whose every touch had hitherto been so full of tenderness. If he had loved as she had loved how could he live without her? He had explained his idea of a wife, and though he had spoken the words in his anger, still she had been proud. But now it seemed as though he would have her believe that she was wholly unnecessary to him. It could not be so. He could not so have deceived her. It must be that he would want her as she wanted him, and

that he must return to her to satisfy the cravings of his own heart.

But as time went on her tenderness gradually turned to anger. He had pronounced the sentence, the heaviest sentence which his mind could invent against her whom he had made his own. Was that sentence just? She told herself again and again that it was most unjust. The fault which she had committed deserved no such punishment. She confessed to herself that she had promised to become the wife of a man unworthy of her; but when she had done so she had not known her present husband. He at least had no cause of anger with her in regard to that. And she, as soon as she had found out her mistake and the man's character had become in part revealed to her, had with a terrible courage taken the bull by the horns and broken away from the engagement which outward circumstances at any rate made attrac-

tive. Then with her mother she had gone abroad, and there she had met with Mr. Western. At the moment of their meeting she had been at any rate innocent in regard to him. From that moment she had performed her duty to him, and had been sincere in her love, even as such a man as Mr. Western could desire,—with the one exception of her silence. It was true that she should have told him of Sir Francis Geraldine; of her folly in accepting him and her courage in repudiating him. Day by day the days had gone by, and there had been some cause for fresh delay, that cause having ever reference to his immediate comfort. Did she not know that had she told him, his offer, his love, his marriage would have been the same? And now, was she to be turned adrift and thrown aside, rejected and got rid of at an instant's notice, because, for his comfort, the telling of her story had been delayed? The

injustice, the cruelty, the inhumanity of such a punishment were very plain to her.

Could he do it? As her husband had he a right so to dismiss her from his bosom? And his money? Perish his money! And his house! The remembrance of the offers which he made to her aggravated her wrath bitterly. As his wife she had a right to his care, to his presence, and to his tenderness. She had not married him simply to be maintained and housed. Nor was that the meaning of their marriage contract. Before God he had no right to send her away from him, and to bid her live and die alone.

But though he had no right he had the power. She could not force him to be her companion. The law would give her only those things which she did not care to claim. He already offered more than the law would exact, and she despised his generosity. As

long as he supported her the law could not bring him back and force him to give her to eat of his own loaf, and to drink of his own cup. The law would not oblige him to encircle her in his arms. The law would not compel him to let her rest upon his bosom. None of those privileges which were undoubtedly her own could the law obtain for her. He had said that he had gone, and would not return, and the law could not bring him back again. Then she sat and wept, and told herself how much better for her would have been that single life of which Miss Altifiorla had preached to her the advantages.

The second day since his departure had passed and she had taken no step. Alone she had given way to sorrow and to indignation, but as yet had decided on nothing. She had waited, still thinking that something would be

done to soften her sorrow; but nothing had been done. The servants around her moved slowly, solemnly, and as though struck with awe. Her own maid had tried to say a word once and again, but had been silenced by the manner of her mistress. Cecilia, though she felt the weight of the silence, could not bring herself to tell the girl that her husband had left her for ever. The servants no doubt knew it all, but she could not bring herself to tell them that it was so. He had told her that her cheques on his bankers would be paid, but she had declared that on no account should such cheque be drawn by her. If he had made up his mind to desert her, and had already left her without intending further communication, she must provide for herself. She must go back to her mother, where the eyes of all Exeter would see her. But she must in the first instance write to her mother; and

how could she explain to her mother all that had happened? Would even her own mother believe her when she said that she was already deserted by her husband for ever and ever because she had not told him the story respecting Sir Francis Geraldine?

On the third morning she resolved that she would write to her husband. It was not fit, so she told herself, that she should leave his house without some further word of instruction from him. But how to address him she was ignorant. He was gone, but she did not know whither. The servants, no doubt, knew where, but she could not bring herself to ask them. On the third day she wrote as follows. The reader will remember that that short scrawl which she addressed to him from her bedroom had not been sent.

'DEAR GEORGE,—This is the first letter I have written to you as your wife, and it will be

very sad. I do not think that you can have remembered that yours would be the first which I had ever received from my husband.

'Your order has crushed me altogether. It shall, nevertheless, be obeyed as far as I am able to obey it. You say something as to your means, and something also as to your house. In that you cannot be obeyed. It is not possible that I should take your money or live in your house unless I am allowed to do so as your wife. The law, I think, says that I may do so. But the law, of course, cannot compel a man to be a loving, tender husband, or even to accept the tenderness of a loving wife. I know what you owe me, but I know also that I cannot exact it unless you can give it with all your heart. Your money and your house I will not have unless I can have them together with yourself. Your bread would

choke me. Your roof would not shelter me Your good things would be poison to me,—unless you were here to make me feel that they were yours also as well as mine. If you mean to insist on the severity of your order, you will have to get rid of me altogether. I shall then have come across two men of which I do not know whether to wonder most at the baseness of the one or the cruelty of the other. In that case I can only return to my mother. In that case you will not, I think, care much what may become of me; but as I shall still bear your name, it is, I suppose, proper that you should know where I purpose living.

'But, dear George, dearest George,—I wish you could know how much dearer to me in spite of your cruelty than all the world besides,—I cannot even yet bring myself to believe that we can for ever be separated. Dear George, endeavour to think how small

has been my offence and how tremendous is the punishment which you propose. The offence is so small that I will not let myself down by asking your pardon. Had you said a word sitting beside me, even a word of anger, then I could have done so. I think I could have made you believe how altogether accidental it had been. But I will not do so now. I should aggravate my own fault till it would appear to you that I had done something of which I ought to be ashamed, and which perhaps you ought not to forgive. I have done nothing of which I am ashamed, and nothing certainly which you ought even to think it necessary to pardon.' When she had got so far she sat for a while thinking whether she would or would not tell him of the cause and the manner of her silence. Should she refer him to his sister, who understood so well how that silence had been produced? Should she

explain to him that she had in the first case hesitated to tell him her story because her story had been so like to his own? But as she thought of it all, she declared to herself that were she to do so she would in truth condescend to ask his pardon. What she required of him was that he should acknowledge her nature, her character, her truth to be such that he had made a grievous mistake in attributing to her aught that was a just cause of anger. 'You stupid girl, you foolish girl, to have given yourself and me such cause for discomfort!' That he should have said to her, with his arm round her waist; that and nothing more. Thinking of all this she resolved not to go into that subject. Should she ever do so it must be when he had come back to her, and was sitting there with his arm around her waist. She ended her letter, therefore, very shortly. 'As I must wait here till I hear from you, and

cannot even write to my mother till I do so, I must beg you to answer my letter quickly. I shall endeavour to go on without drawing any cheques. If I find it necessary I shall have to write to my mother for money.

'Your most affectionate wife,

'CECILIA WESTERN.'

'Oh, George, if you knew how I love you!'

Then, as she did not like to send the letter out among the servants without any address, and thus to confess to them that she did not know where her husband had gone, she directed the letter to him at his club in London.

During the next day or two the pity of her servants, the silent, unexpressed pity, was very hard to bear. As each morning came her punishment seemed to become more and more

intolerable to her. She could not read. There were none among her friends, not even her mother, to whom she could write. It was still her hope,—her faintest hope, that she need confess to none of them the fact that her husband had quarrelled with her. She could only sit and ponder over the tyranny of the man who by his mere suspicions could subject a woman to so cruel a fate. But on the evening of the third day she was told that a gentleman had called to see her. Mr. Gray sent his card in to her, and she at once recognised Mr. Gray as her husband's attorney. She was sitting at the open window of her own bedroom, looking into the garden, and she was aware that she had been weeping. 'I will be down at once,' she said to the maid, 'if Mr. Gray will wait.'

'Oh, ma'am, you do take on so dreadfully!' said the girl.

'Never mind, Mary. I will come down and see Mr. Gray if you will leave me.'

'Oh, ma'am, oh, Miss Holt, I have known you so long, may I not say a word to you?'

'I am not Miss Holt. I am still entitled to bear my husband's name.' Then the girl, feeling herself to have been rebuked, was leaving the room, when her mistress jumped up from her seat, took her in her arms, and kissed her. 'Oh, Mary,' she said, 'I am unhappy, so unhappy! But pray do not tell them. It is true that you have known me long, and I can trust you.' Then the girl, crying much more bitterly than her mistress, left the room.

In a few minutes Cecilia followed her, and entered the parlour into which Mr. Gray had been shown, without a sign of tears upon her cheeks. She had been able to assume a look of injured feminine dignity, of almost magnificent in-

nocence, by which the lawyer was much startled. She was resolved at any rate to confess no injury done by herself to her husband, and to say nothing to Mr. Gray of any injury done by him to her. Mr. Gray, too, was a gentleman, a man over fifty years of age, who had been solicitor to Mr. Western's father. He knew the husband in this case well, but he had as yet known nothing of the wife. He had been simply told by Mr. Western to understand that he, Mr. Western, had no fault to find with the lady; that he had not a word to say against her; but that unfortunately circumstances had so turned out that all married happiness was impossible for him. Mr. Gray had endeavoured to learn the facts; but he had been aware that Mr. Western was a man who would not bear pumping. A question or two he had asked, and had represented to his client how dreadful was the condition to which he was condemning

both the lady and himself. But his observations were received with that peculiar cold civility which the man's manner assumed when he felt that interference was taken in matters which were essentially private to himself. 'It is so, Mr. Gray, that in this case it cannot be avoided. I wish you to understand, that all pecuniary arrangements are to be made for Mrs. Western which she herself may desire. Were she to ask for everything I possess she must have it,—down to the barest pittance.' But at this moment he had not received his wife's letter.

There was a majesty of beauty about Mrs. Western by which Mr. Gray was startled, but which he came to recognise before the interview was over. I cannot say that he understood the cause of the quarrel, but he had become aware that there was much in the lady very much on a par with her husband's

character. And she, when she found out, as she did instinctively, that she had to deal with a gentleman, dropped something of the hauteur of her silence. But she said not a word as to the cause of their disagreement. Mr. Gray asked the question in the simplest language. 'Can you not tell me why you two have quarrelled so quickly after your marriage?' But she simply referred him to her husband. 'I think you must ask Mr. Western about that.' Mr. Gray renewed the question, feeling how important it was that he should know. But she only smiled, and again referred him to her husband. But when he came to speak to her about money arrangements she smiled no longer. 'It will not be necessary,' she said.

'But it is Mr. Western's wish.'

'It will not be necessary. Mr. Western has decided that we must—part. On that matter I have nothing to say. But there will

be nothing for any lawyer to do on my behalf. If Mr. Western has made up his mind, I will return to my mother. I can assure you that no steps need be taken as to money.' 'No steps will be possible,' she added with all that feminine majesty which was peculiar to her. 'I understand from you that Mr. Western's mind is made up. You can tell him that I shall be ready to leave this house for my mother's, in—let me say a week.' Mr. Gray went back to town having been able to make no other arrangement. He might pay the servants' wages,—when they were due; and the tradesmen's bills; but for herself and her own peculiar wants Mrs. Western would take no money. 'You may tell Mr. Western,' she said, 'that I shall not have to encroach on his liberality.' So Mr. Gray went back to town; and Mrs. Western carried herself through the interview without the shedding of a tear, with-

out the utterance of a word of tenderness,—so that the lawyer on leaving her hardly knew what her wishes were.

'Nevertheless I think it is his doing,' he said to himself. 'I think she loves him.'

CHAPTER XIV.

TO WHAT A PUNISHMENT!

Mr. Western, when he received his wife's letter, after having given his instructions to the lawyer, was miserable enough. But not on that account did he think of changing his purpose. He had made up his mind,—as men say, and having made it up he assured himself that he had done it with ample cause. He could not quite explain to himself the reasons for his anger. He did not quite know what were the faults of which he accused his wife. But he was sure that his wrath was just, and had come from sins on her part which it would be unbecoming that he as a man and a husband

should condone. And his anger was the hotter because he did not know what those sins were. There had been some understanding,—so he thought,—between his wife and Sir Francis Geraldine which was derogatory to his honour. There had been an understanding and a subsequent quarrel, and Sir Francis Geraldine had been base enough to inform him of the understanding because of the quarrel. Sir Francis no doubt had been very base, but not on that account had his wife been less a sinner. What was it to him that Sir Francis should be base? No vice, no lies, no cruelty on the part of Sir Francis were anything to him. But his wife; —that she whom he had taken to his bosom as his own, that she in whom he had believed, she who was to be the future depository of all his secrets, his very second self, that she, in the very moment in which he had exposed to her the tenderness of his heart, that she should then

have entertained a confidential intercourse with such a one as Sir Francis Geraldine, an intercourse of which she had intended that he should know nothing,—that, that was more than he could endure. It was this,—this feeling that he was to know nothing of it, which was too much for him. It seemed to him that he had been selected to be a stalking-horse for them in their intercourse. It was not that he ever accused his wife of illicit love. He was not base enough to think her so base as that. But there had been some cause for a mysterious alliance as to which he had been kept in the dark. To be kept in the dark, and by his own wife, was the one thing that was unendurable. And then the light had been let in upon him by that letter from Sir Francis, in which Sir Francis had offered 'such courtesies as are generally held to be pleasant in a neighbourhood!' The intention had been that this

old friendship should be renewed under his roof, and be renewed without any information being given to him that it had ever previously existed. This was the feeling that had made it incumbent on him to repudiate a wife who had so treated him. This was the feeling which forbad him to retreat from his suicidal purpose. His wife had had a secret, a secret which it was not intended that he should share, and her partner in the secret had been that man whom of all men he had despised the most, and who, as he now learnt, had been only the other day engaged to marry her. In fostering his wrath he had declared to himself that it was but only the other day; and he had come to think that at the very moment in which he had told Cecilia Holt of all his own troubles she had then, even then, been engaged to this abominable baronet. 'I have got another man to offer to marry me, and

therefore our engagement, which is a trouble to us both, may now be over.' Some such communication as this had been made, and he had been the victim of it.

And yet as he thought of all this, and nursed his rage, and told himself how impossible it was that he should even pretend to live with such a woman with continued confidence, even then he was at moments almost overcome by the tenderness of his recollections. He had loved her so entirely; and she to his outward eyes and outward ears had been so fit to be loved! He had thanked his stars that after running into so great a peril with that other lady it had at last been given to him to settle his heart where it might dwell securely. She had required from him no compliments, none of the little weaknesses of love-making, no pretences, had demanded from him the taking of no trouble which would have grated against his

feeling. She had been everything that his very soul desired. Even on the day after their wedding he had been able to sit down with her in a quiet and assured conviction that she was all that he wanted to make him happy. And she had played her part so well! She had been to him as though it had been a fresh thing to her to love a man with all her heart, and to be able to talk to him of her love. And yet she, the while, was in secret and most intimate communication with a man to whom he had been in the habit of applying within his own breast all the vilest epithets which the language could afford. 'Swindler, thief, scoundrel,' were the terms he had thought of. In his dislike to the ways of the world in general he had declared to himself that the world admitted such as Sir Francis within its high places without disgust. This was the man who had coolly demanded to be intimate with him, and had done so in order

that he might maintain his acquaintance with his wife!

We know how wrong he was in these thoughts;—how grievously he wronged her of whom he was thinking. Of the worst of all these sins she was absolutely innocent;—of so much the worst that the fault of which she had not been innocent was not worth regarding when thought of in reference to that other crime. But still it was thus that he believed, and though he was aware that he was about to submit himself to absolute misery in decreeing their separation, yet there was to his thinking no other remedy. He had been kept in the dark. To the secrets of others around him he was he declared to himself absolutely indifferent. They might have their mysteries and it would be nothing to him. He had desired to have one whose mysteries should be his mysteries; who should share every thought of his heart,

and of whose secret thoughts he desired to keep the only key. He had flattered himself that it was so, and this had been the result! It may be doubted whether his misery were not altogether as bitter as hers.

'Of course she shall live with her mother if she pleases it,' he said to Mr. Gray on the following morning. 'As to money, if she will name no sum that she requires I must leave it to you to say what in justice ought to be allowed to her. You know all the circumstances of my property.'

'But I know none of the circumstances of your marriage,' replied Mr. Gray.

'They were altogether of the usual kind.'

'None of the circumstances of your separation, I should have said.'

'It is unnecessary,' replied Mr. Western, gloomily.

'It will be very difficult to give her any advice.'

'You may take it if you will that the fault is all mine. I would provide for her as I should be bound to do if by my own cruelty or my own misconduct I had driven her from me!' He had no idea as he said this that by his own cruelty and his own misconduct he was driving her from him.

'My conviction is that she will take nothing,' said Mr. Gray.

'In a matter of business she must take it. The money must be paid to her, let her do what she will with it. Even though it should be thrown into the sea, I must pay it.'

'I think you will find that she has a will of her own.'

'And she will find that I have,' said Mr. Western with a frown. It was exactly on this point that the husband and wife were being separated. He had thought that she had calculated that when once they were married she

had carried her purpose in spite of his will. But he would let her understand that it was not so. She had so far succeeded that she was entitled to bear his name, but she had not mastered him in the matter, and should not do so.

'It is a thousand pities, Mr. Western, you will allow me to say so, but it is a thousand pities. A most handsome lady:—with a fine lady-like air! One in a thousand!'

Mr. Western could not endure to hear the catalogue of his wife's charms set forth to him. He did not want to be told by his lawyer that she was 'handsome' and 'one in a thousand'! In that respect their quarrel made no difference. No gentleman wishes another to assure him that his wife is one in a thousand. An old mother might say so, or an old aunt; hardly any one less near and less intimate could be allowed to do so. Mr. Western was aware that no man in the ordinary course of events would

be less likely to offend in that way than Mr. Gray. But in this case Mr. Gray should not, he thought, have done it. He had come to Mr. Gray about money and not about his wife's beauty. 'I hardly think we need discuss that,' he said, still with a heavy frown on his brow. 'Perhaps you will think over what I have said to you, and name a sum to-morrow.'

'At the risk of making you angry I have to speak,' continued Mr. Gray. 'I knew your father, and have known you all your life. If this is to make her miserable, and if, as I gather, she has committed no great fault, will it not be —wicked?' Mr. Gray sat silent for a few moments, looking him in the face. 'Have you consulted your own conscience, and what it will say to you after a time? She has given all that she has to you, though there has not been a shilling,—and no money can repay her. One fault is not pardonable,—one only fault.'

'No, no. I do not accuse her.'

'Nor dream that she is guilty,—if I understand the matter rightly.'

'No, I do not. But I do not come here to be interrogated about her after this fashion,—nor to be told that I am wicked. For what sins I commit I must be myself responsible. I am unable,—at any rate unwilling,—to tell you the circumstances, and must leave you to draw your own conclusions. If you will think over the matter, and will name a sum, I shall be obliged to you.' Then he was about to leave the chamber, but Mr. Gray interposed himself between his client and the door.

'Pray excuse me, Mr. Western. I know that you are angry, but pray excuse me. I should ill do my duty to an old client whom I respect did I not dare, as being older than he is, to give the advice which as a bystander I think that he requires.' Mr. Western stood perfectly silent

before him, but clearly showing his wrath by the frown upon his brow. 'I venture to say that you are taking upon yourself as a husband to do that which the world will not pardon.'

'I care nothing for the world.'

'Pardon me. You will care for it when you come to consider that its decision has been just. When you have to reflect that you have ruined for ever the happiness of a woman whom you have sworn to love and protect, and that you have cast her from you for some reason which you cannot declare and which is not held to justify such usage, then you will regard what the world says. You will regard it because your own conscience will say the same. If I mistake not you still love her.'

'I am not here to discuss such points,' said Mr. Western angrily.

'Think of the severity of the punishment which you are inflicting upon one whom you

love; and of the effect it must have on her feelings. I tell you that you have no right to do this,—unless she has been guilty as you confess she has not.' Then he seated himself in his arm-chair, and Mr. Western left the chamber without saying another word.

He went out into Lincoln's Inn, and walked westward towards his Club, hardly knowing in his confusion whither he was going. At first his breast was hot with anger against Mr. Gray. The man had called him wicked and cruel, and had known nothing of the circumstances. Could it be wicked, could it be cruel for him to resent such treachery as that of which he had been the victim? All his holiest hopes had been used against him for the vilest purposes and with the most fell effect! He at any rate had been ruined for ever. And the man had told him about the world! What did he in his misery care for the world's judgment? Cecilia

had married him,—and in marrying him had torn his heart asunder. This man had accused him of cruelty in leaving her. But how could he have continued to live with her without hypocrisy? Cruel indeed! What were her sufferings to his,—hers, who had condescended to the level of Sir Francis Geraldine, and had trafficked with such a one as that as to the affairs of their joint happiness! To such a woman it was not given to suffer. Yes; she was beautiful and she looked as a lady should look. Mr. Gray had been right enough in that. But he had not known how looks may deceive, how noble to the eye may be the face of a woman while her heart within is ignoble, paltry, and mean. But as he went on with his walk by degrees he came to forget Mr. Gray, and to think of the misery which was in store for himself. And though at the moment he despised Mr. Gray, his thoughts did occupy themselves

exactly with those perils of which Mr. Gray had spoken. The woman had trusted herself to his care and had given him her beauty and her solicitude. He did in his heart believe that she loved him. He remembered the last words of her letter—'Oh, George, if you knew how I love you!' He did not doubt but that those words were true. He did not suppose that she had given her heart to Sir Francis Geraldine,—that she had truly and sincerely devoted herself to one so mean as that! Such heart as she had to give had been given to himself. But there had been traffic of marriage with this man, and even continued correspondence and an understanding as to things which had put her with all her loveliness on a level with him rather than with her existing husband. What this understanding was he did not, he said, care to inquire. It had existed and still did exist. That was enough to make him know that she was untrue to him as

his wife,—untrue in spirit if not in body. But in truth he did care to know. It was, indeed, because he had not known, because he had been allowed only to guess and search and think about it, that all this misery had come. He had been kept in the dark, and to be kept in the dark was to him, of all troubles, the most grievous. When he had first received the letter from Sir Francis he had not believed it to be true ;—from first to last it had been a fiction. But when once his wife had told him that the engagement had existed, he believed all. It was as though she had owned to him the circumstance of a still existing intimate friendship. He had been kept in the dark, but he did not know how far.

But still there loomed to him as to the future, vaguely, the idea that by the deed he was doing now, at this present moment, he was sacrificing her happiness and his own for ever,—as regarded this world. And the people

would say that he had done so, the people whose voices he could not but regard. She would say so, and her mother,—and he must acknowledge it. And Lady Grant would know that it had been so, and Mr. Gray would always think so to the end. And his heart became tender even towards her. What would be her fate,—as his wife and therefore debarred from the prospects of any other future? She would live with her mother as any widow would live,—with much less of hope, with less chance of enjoying her life, than would any other widow. And when her mother should die she would be all alone. To what a punishment was he not dooming her!

If he could die himself it would be well for all parties. He had taken his great step in life and had failed. Why should he doom her, who was differently constituted, to similar failure? It had been a great mistake. He

had made it and now there was no escape. But then again his pity for himself welled up in his heart. Why had he been so allured, so deceived, so cozened? He had intended to have given all good things. The very essence of his own being he had bestowed upon her, —while she, the moment that his back was turned, was corresponding with Sir Francis Geraldine! That thought he could not stand. She, in truth, had been greatly in error in her first view of the character of Sir Francis Geraldine; but it must be a question whether he was not so also. The baronet was a poor creature, but not probably so utterly vile as he thought him. As he turned it all over in his mind, while wandering to and fro, he came to the conclusion that Mr. Gray was wrong, and that it was impossible that she who had been the sharer of the thoughts of Sir Francis Geraldine, should now remain to share his.

CHAPTER XV.

ONCE MORE AT EXETER.

THREE weeks had passed and much had been done for Mrs. Western to fix her fate in life. It was now August, and she was already living at Exeter as a wife separated from her husband. Of much she had had to think and much to determine before she had found that haven of rest. Twice during the time she had received letters from her husband, but each letter had been short, and, though not absolutely without affection in its language, each letter had been absolutely obdurate. He had been made quite sure that it was not for the benefit of either of them that they should attempt to live together.

Having come to that decision, which he represented as unchangeable, he was willing, he said, to do anything which she might demand for her future satisfaction and comfort. 'There is nothing you can do,' she had said when she had written last, 'as you have refused to do your duty.' This had made him again angry. 'What right had she to talk to me of my duty seeing that she has so grossly neglected her own?' he said to himself. Then he had suddenly gone from England, leaving no address even with his sister or with his lawyer. But during this time his mind was not quiet for one instant. How could she have treated him so, him, who had been so absolutely devoted to her, who had so entirely given himself up to her happiness?

Lady Grant, when she had heard what was to be done, had hurried up to London but had not found them. She had gone to Exeter

and there she had in vain endeavoured to comfort Cecilia. She had declared that her brother would in time forgive. But Cecilia's whole nature had by this time apparently been changed. 'Forgive!' she had said. 'What will he forgive? There is nothing that he can forgive; nothing that can be spoken of in the same breath with his perfidy and cruelty. Can I forgive? Ask yourself that, Lady Grant. Is it possible that I should forgive?' After two days spent in conversations such as these, Lady Grant went back to town and discussed the matter with Mr. Gray. They did not at present know her brother's address; but still there was a hope that she might induce him to hear reason and again to consent to live with his wife. 'Of all men,' she said to the lawyer, 'he is the most honest and the most affectionate; but of all men the most self-willed and obstinate. An injustice is with him like a

running sore; and, alas, it is not always an injustice, but a something that he has believed to be unjust.'

Cecilia had written at great length to her mother, telling her with all details the story as it was to be told, and sparing herself in nothing. 'That wicked man has contrived it all. But, oh, that such a one as my husband should have been weak enough to have fallen into a pit so prepared!' Then Mrs. Holt had come up to town and taken her daughter back with her to Exeter. Now, at last, on this occasion, the old lady was both energetic and passionate. There had been much discussion before they had both decided that they would again venture to live together among their old friends in their old home. But here Cecilia had shown herself to be once again stronger than her mother. 'Why not?' she said. 'What have I done to make it necessary that

you should be torn away from your house? I am not at all ashamed of what I have done.' In this she had blazoned forth her courage with almost a false conviction. She knew that she had done wrong;—that she had done that of which among wives she ought to be ashamed. But her sin had been so small in comparison with the punishment inflicted upon her that it sunk to nothing even in her own eyes. She felt that she had been barbarously used. The people of Exeter, or the people of the world at large, might sympathise with her or not as they pleased. But under such a mountain of wrong as she had endured, she would not show by any conduct of her own that she could have in the least deserved it. 'No, mamma,' she said; 'let them stay away or let them come, I shall be ready for either. I am a poor, wretched woman, whom to crush utterly has been within the power of the man she has

loved. He has chosen to exercise it, and I must suffer. But he shall not make me ashamed. I have done nothing to deserve his cruelty.'

And then when she had been at Exeter but a few days there came another source of trouble,—though not of unmitigated trouble. She told her mother that in due course of time her cruel husband would become the father of a child. She would not write to him. He had not chosen to let her know his address; nor was it fitting to her feelings to communicate such a fact in a letter which she must address secretly to his banker or to his club. Yet the fact was of such a nature that it was imperative that he should know it. At last it was told by Mrs. Holt to Lady Grant. Cecilia had herself attempted it, but had found that she could not do it. She could not write the letter without some word of tenderness, and she was resolved that no word of tender-

ness should go from her to him. It would seem as though she were asking for money, and were putting forward the coming of the little stranger as a plea for it. She would ask for no money. She had appealed to his love, and had appealed in vain. If he were hard, she would be so too. In her heart of hearts she probably entertained the idea of some possible future in which she might yet put the child into its father's arms;—but it should be done not at her request. It should be at his prayer. At least there was this comfort to her,—that she no longer dreaded his power. He had so contrived that to her thinking the fault was altogether on his side. Forgive! Oh yes; she would forgive! Oh yes; she would forgive, so readily, so sweetly, with the full determination that it should all be like a blank nightmare that had come between them and troubled their joys. But in the bottom of

the heart of each it must be understood that it had been hers to pardon and his to be pardoned. Or if not so, then she must continue to live her widowed life at Exeter.

Mrs. Holt was energetic and passionate rather than discreet. She would not admit that her child had done any wrong, and could not be got to understand but that the law should make a husband live with his wife in the proper way. It was monstrous to her thinking that her daughter should be married and taken away, and then sent back, without any offence on her part. In the resentment which she felt against Mr. Western she filled quite a new part among the people of Exeter. 'Oh, mamma; you are so loving, so good,' said her daughter; 'but do not let us talk about it! Cannot you understand that, angry as I am, I cannot endure to have him abused?' 'Abused!' said Mrs. Holt, kindling in her

wrath. 'I cannot hold myself without abusing him.' But it very soon did come to pass that Mr. Western's name was not mentioned between them. Mrs. Holt would now and again clench her fist and shake her head, and Cecilia knew that in her thoughts she was executing some vengeance against Mr. Western; but there was a truce to spoken words. Cecilia indeed often executed her vengeance against her husband after some fashion of her own, but her mother did not perceive it.

Among their Exeter friends there soon came to be an actual breach with Miss Altifiorla. Miss Altifiorla, as soon as it was known that Mrs. Western had reappeared in Exeter, had rushed down to greet her friend. There she had been received coldly by Cecilia, and more than coldly by Cecilia's mother. 'My dear Cecilia,' she had said, attempting to take hold

of her friend's hand, 'I told you what would come of it.'

'There need be nothing said about it,' said Mrs. Western.

'Not after the first occasion,' said Miss Altifiorla. 'A few words between us to show that each understands the other will be expedient.'

'I do not see that any words can be of service,' said Mrs. Western.

'Not in the least,' said Mrs. Holt. 'Why need anything be said? You know that she has been cruelly ill-used, and that is all you need know.'

'I do know the whole history of it,' said Miss Altifiorla, who had taken great pride to herself among the people of Exeter in being the best-informed person there as to Mrs. Western's sad affairs. 'I was present up to the moment, and I must say that if Cecilia

had then taken my advice things would have been very different. I am not blaming her.'

'I should hope not,' said Mrs. Holt.

'But things would have been very different. Cecilia was a little timid at telling her husband the truth. And Mr. Western was like other gentlemen. He did not like to be kept in the dark by his wife. You see that Cecilia has given mortal cause for offence to two gentlemen.'

This was not to be endured. Cecilia did not exactly know all the facts as they had occurred,—between Miss Altifiorla and Sir Francis,—and certainly knew none of those which were now in process of occurring; but she strongly suspected that something had taken place, that some conversation had been held, between her friend and Sir Francis Geraldine. She had been allowed to read the letter from Sir Francis to her husband, and

she remembered well the meaning of it. But she could not remember the terms which he had used. She had, however, thought that something which had passed between himself and Miss Altifiorla had been the immediate cause of the writing of that letter. She did think that Miss Altifiorla had, as it were, gone over to the enemy. That she had been prepared to pardon. The enemy had in fact told no falsehood in his letter. It had been her misfortune that the story which he had told had been true;—and her further misfortune that her husband should have believed so much more than the truth. For all that she did not hold Miss Altifiorla to be responsible. But when she was told that she had given cause for mortal offence to two gentlemen, there was something in the phrase which greatly aggravated her anger. It was as though this would-be friend was turning against her for her conduct towards

Sir Francis. And she was just as angry that the friend should turn against her for her conduct to her husband. 'Miss Altifiorla,' she said, 'I must request that there be no further conversation between us in reference to the difference between me and my husband.'

'Miss Altifiorla!' said the lady. 'Is it to come to that, Cecilia;—between you and me who have enjoyed so much sweet friendship?'

'Certainly, if you make yourself so offensive,' said Mrs. Holt.

'It is the only mode by which I can show that I am in earnest,' said Cecilia. 'If it does not succeed, I must declare that I shall be unwilling to meet you at all. I told you to be silent, and you would not.'

'Oh, very well! If you like to quarrel it will quite suit me. But in your present condition I hardly think that you are wise in

throwing off your old friends. It is just the time when you ought to cling to those who would be true to you.'

This was more than Cecilia could bear. 'I shall cling to those who are true to me,' she said, leaving the room.

'Oh, very well! Then I shall know how to conduct myself.' This was addressed to Mrs. Holt.

'I hope you will conduct yourself, as you call it, somewhere away from here. You're very fond of meddling, that's the truth; and Cecilia in her present condition does not want to be meddled with. Oh, yes; you can go away as soon as ever you please.' Thereupon Miss Altifiorla left the room and withdrew.

It must be explained that this lady, since she was last upon the scene, had learned to entertain new hopes, very exalted in their

nature. It had first occurred to her during those ten minutes at the Paddington railway station, that it might possibly be so if she played her cards well. And then how glorious would be the result! Sir Francis Geraldine had squeezed her hand. If he might be made to go on squeezing her hand sufficiently, how great might be the effect produced! Lady Geraldine! How beautiful was the sound! She thought that within all the bounds of the English peerage,—and she believed that she knew that those bounds included the Baronets, —there was no sweeter, no more glorious, no more aristocratic appellation. Lady Geraldine! What a change, what a blissful change would that be!

When she thought of the chill of her present life, of its want of interest, of its insipid loneliness, and then told herself what might be in store for her should she live to become Lady Geral-

dine, she declared to herself that even though the chance might be very small, the greatness of the reward if gained would justify the effort. Lady Geraldine! And she saw no reason why her chance should be so very small. She had a cousin with a pedigree longer than even that of Sir Francis,—Count Altifiorla, who, indeed, had no money, but was a genuine Count. She herself had a nice little sum of money, quite enough to be agreeable to a gentleman who might be somewhat out at elbows from the effects of Newmarket. And she did not think too little of her own personal appearance. She knew that she had a good wearing complexion, and that her features were of that sort which did not yield very readily to the hand of time. There were none of the endearing dimples of early youth, none of the special brightness of English feminine loveliness, none of the fresh tints of sweet girlhood; but Miss Altifiorla

boasted to herself that she would look the British aristocratic matron very well. She certainly had not that Juno beauty which Cecilia Holt could boast, that beauty which could be so severe to all chance comers, but which could melt at once and become soft and sweet and easy to one favoured individual. Miss Altifiorla acknowledged to herself that it was her nature always to remain outwardly the same to all men. But then dress and diamonds, and all the applied paraphernalia of aristocracy would, she felt, go far with her.

If Sir Francis could be once got to admire her, she was sure that Sir Francis would never be driven to repent of his bargain from any falling off on her part. She thought that she would know how to be the master; but this would be an after consideration, and one as to which she need not at present pay especial attention. Sir Francis had squeezed her hand

most affectionately, and there had been a subsequent meeting at Exeter, where he had stayed a couple of hours as he went through to his own property. And she was sure that he had stayed for the purpose of meeting her. Since that affair with Cecilia Holt he had not been made warmly welcome at the Deanery. Yet he had stayed and had absolutely called upon Miss Altifiorla. He had found her and had discussed Mr. and Mrs. Western with much sarcastic humour. 'Now you haven't!' Miss Altifiorla had said, when he told her of the letter he had written. 'How could you be so hard upon the poor man?' 'Perhaps the lady may think that I have been hard upon her,' Sir Francis had replied. 'Perhaps she will know the meaning of tit for tat. Perhaps she will understand now that one good turn deserves another. It was not that I cared so much for her,' he said. 'I'd got to feel that she was far too virtuous for me,

too stuck up, you'll understand. I wasn't at all disappointed when she played me that trick. She didn't turn out the sort of girl that I had taken her for. I knew that I had had an escape. But, nevertheless, tit for tat is fair on both sides. She played me a trick, and now I've played her one and we are even. We can each go to work again. She began a little too soon, perhaps, for her own comfort; but that's her affair and not mine.'

In answer to all this, Miss Altifiorla had only laughed and smiled and declared that Cecilia had been served right, though she thought,—she said that she thought,—that Sir Francis had been almost too hard. 'That's my way of doing business,' he had added. 'If anyone wants me to run straight, they must begin by running straight themselves. I can be as sweet as new milk if I'm well treated.' Then there had been a moment in which Miss Alti-

fiorla had almost expected that he was going to do something preparatory to declaring himself. She was convinced that he was about to kiss her; but at the very moment at which the event had been expected, Mrs. Green had been announced and the kiss did not, alas, come off. She could hardly bring herself to be civil to Mrs. Green when Sir Francis declared that he must go to the station.

CHAPTER XVI.

'IT IS ALTOGETHER UNTRUE.'

THE month of September wore itself away at Exeter very sadly. An attempt was made to bid Mrs. Western welcome back to her old home; but from the nature of the circumstances there could hardly be much heartiness in the attempt. Mrs. Thorne came over from Honiton to see her, but even between Cecilia and Maude Hippesly, who was certainly the most cherished of her Exeter friends, there could be no free confidence, although there was much sympathy. Mrs. Western could bring herself to speak evil to no one of her husband. She had, with much passion, told the entire story to her

mother, but when her mother had begun to say hard words respecting him Cecilia had found it impossible to bear them. Had her mother taken Mr. Western's part, it may be doubted whether she could have endured that. There was no speech concerning him which was possible for her ears. She still looked forward to the chance of having him back again, and if he would come back, if he would take her back, then he should be entirely forgiven. He should be so forgiven that no mutual friend should have heard a word of reproach from her lips. She herself would know how hardly she had been used; but there should be no one to say that she had ever been heard to complain of her husband. Not the less was her heart full of wrath. Not the less did she during every hour of the day turn over in her thoughts the terrible injustice of which she had been the victim. But it can be understood that even to her old

friend Maude Hippesly, who was now happy in her new home as Mrs. Thorne, she could not talk openly of the circumstances of her separation. But there was, alas, no other subject of such interest to her at the present moment as to give matter for free conversation.

The Dean's family, and especially Mrs. Hippesly, attempted to be kind to her. The Dean himself came down and called with much decanal grandeur, conspicuous as he walked up to the Hall door with shovel hat and knee breeches. But even the Dean could not do much. He had intended to take Mrs. Western's part as against his brother-in-law, having been no doubt prompted by some old feeling of favour towards Cecilia Holt; but now he was given to understand that this Mr. Western had also gone astray, and in such a way as to make it hardly possible that he should talk about it. He called therefore and took her by the hand, and ex-

pressed a hope that all things should be made to go straight, and then he left her, taking her by the hand again, and endeavouring to prove his esteem by his manner of doing so. That was the beginning and the end of the Dean's comforting. Mrs. Hippesly could do but little more. She did make an attempt at confidential conversation, but was soon stopped by Cecilia's cold manner. Mrs. Western, indeed, could speak to none. She could not utter a word either for or against her husband. Mrs. Green came, of course, more than once; but it was the same thing. Mrs. Western could endure to talk and to be talked to about nothing. And though there was friendship in it, it was but a subdued feeling of friendship,—of friendship which under the circumstances had to be made silent. Mrs. Green when she had taken her leave determined not to come again immediately, and Mrs. Western when Mrs. Green

had gone felt that she did not wish her to come. She could live with her mother more easily than with her old friends, because her mother understood the tone of her mind. Each kept their thoughts to themselves on that subject of which each was thinking; but each sympathised with the other.

Lady Grant as soon as she understood the condition of things at once began to correspond with her brother. To her it was a matter of course that he should, sooner or later, take his wife back again. But to her thinking it was most important that he should do so before the fact of their quarrel had been flaunted before the world by an enduring separation. She wrote in the first instance without throwing blame upon either party, but calling upon her brother to show the honesty and honour of his purpose by coming back at once to Durton Lodge, and receiving Cecilia. 'Of course it

must be so sooner or later,' said Lady Grant, 'and the quicker you do it so much easier will be the doing.' It should be told that Mrs. Holt had, without telling her daughter in her passion, herself written to Mr. Western. 'You have sacrificed my daughter in your perversity, and that without the slightest cause for blame.' Such had been the nature of Mrs. Holt's letter, which had reached him but a day before that of his sister. Lady Grant's appeal had not been of the same nature. She had said nothing of the sin of either of them; but had written as though both had been in fault, misunderstanding each other, and neither having been willing to yield a little. Then she had appealed to her brother's love and affectionate disposition. It was not till afterwards that she had been able to inform him of the baby that was expected.

Mr. Western answered his sister's letter

from Dresden. To Mrs. Holt he sent no reply: but he used her letter as the ground for that which he made to Lady Grant, writing as though Mrs. Holt's words had come directly from his wife. 'They say that I have sacrificed Cecilia without the slightest fault on her part. I have not sacrificed her, and there has been terrible fault on her part Fault! A young woman marries a man while she is yet engaged to another, and tells the poor dupe whom she has got within her clutches nothing of her first engagement! Is there no fault in that? And she afterwards entertains the first man at her husband's house, and corresponds with him, and prepares at last to receive him there as a friend, and that without a word on the subject spoken to her husband! Is there no fault in that? And at last the truth becomes known to him because the base man is discontented with the arrangements that have been

made, and chooses to punish her by exposing her at last to the wrath of her husband! I say nothing of him. With his conduct in the world I have no concern. But can all that have taken place with no fault on her part? What in such a state of things should I have done? Should I have contented myself simply with forbidding my wife to receive the man at my house? Should I have asked her no question as to the past? Should I have passed over that engagement which had been in full existence during the last twelve months, and have said nothing of it? Or should I have expressed my anger and then have forgiven her, and attempted to live with her as though this man had never existed? Knowing me as you do, can you say that that would have been possible to me? How could I have lived with a wife of whom I knew so much as I had then learned of mine,—but had known so little

before. Had I been a man of the world, living for the world, careless as to my own home except as to the excellence of my dinner and the comfort of my bed, it might have been possible. A man trusting for his happiness to such means might perhaps have continued to exist and not have been broken-hearted. But I think you will understand that such could not be the case with me. I looked for my happiness to my wife's society, and I discovered when I had married that I could not find it there. I could never respect her!

'But she tells me that having married her I have no right to sacrifice her. As I had been fool enough to allow myself to be so quickly allured by her charms, and had made those charms my own, I was bound to stand by my bargain! That I take it is the argument which she uses. I grant the truth of it. It is I that should be sacrificed and not she. I have

so acted that I am bound to submit myself to such a verdict. What the law would require from me I cannot say. The law might perhaps demand a third of my income. She shall have two-thirds if she wishes it. She shall have seven-eighths if she will ask for it. At present I have given instructions by which during her life she shall have one-half. I am aware that in the heat of her passion she has declined to accept this. It shall nevertheless be paid to her credit. And I must deny that one who has achieved her marriage after such a fashion has any right, when so treated, to regard herself as sacrificed. I am the victim. But as I am convinced that she and I cannot live happily together, I reserve to myself the right of living apart.'

Lady Grant, when she received this letter, immediately sat down to write to Cecilia, but she soon found it to be impossible to put into a

letter all that there was to be said. She was living in the neighbourhood of Perth, whereas her sister-in-law was at Exeter. And yet the matter was of such moment that she perceived it to be essential that they should see each other. Perhaps it might be better that Mrs. Western should come to her; and therefore she wrote to her,—not explaining the cause of the proposed visit, to do which would be as difficult as to write the full letter, but simply saying that in the present condition of things she thought it would be well that Cecilia should visit her. This however Mrs. Western refused to do. She had come to her mother, she said, in her terrible difficulty, and in her present circumstances would not at once leave her. She considered herself bound to obey her husband, and would remain at Exeter until she received instructions from him to leave it.

There was in her letter a subdued tone of

displeasure, which Lady Grant felt that she had not deserved. She at any rate was anxious to do her best. But she would not on that account abandon the task which she had undertaken. Her only doubt was whether she had better go to her brother at Berlin or to his wife at Exeter. She understood perfectly now the nature of those mistaken suspicions which filled her brother's mind. And she was almost sure of the circumstances which had produced them. But she was not quite sure; and were she to make mistakes in discussing the matter with him, such mistakes might be fatal. She thought that with Cecilia she could not do other than good. She knew her brother's mind better than did his wife, and she imagined that between them such a story might be told,—a story so true and so convincing that the husband might be brought back.

The following very short letter therefore

was written. 'My dear Cecilia, as you will not come to me at Perth, I must go to you at Exeter. I shall start this day week and will be with you on the following Wednesday. Do not mind as to a room for me, as I can stop at the hotel; but it is I think imperative that we should see each other. Yours affectionately, Bertha Grant.'

'Mamma, Lady Grant is coming here next week,' said Cecilia to her mother.

'To this house next week?'

'She says that she will come to the hotel; but of course we must receive her here.'

'But why is she coming?'

'I suppose it is because she thinks that something should be done on behalf of her brother. I can understand her feeling, and am sure that she sympathises with me. But I do not think that any good will come of it. Unless he can be made to see how wrong he is

nothing will be able to change him. And until his very nature is changed he will not be made to understand his own fault.' It was thus for the first time for a fortnight that Mrs. Western spoke to her mother about her husband.

At the day appointed Lady Grant came and Mrs. Western met her at the station. 'Of course you will not go to the hotel,' she said; 'there is plenty of room at the house. I am greatly obliged to you for coming. It seems a dreadful thing to have to come on such a business all the way from Perth. I know that I ought to apologise to you for the trouble.'

'Apologise! There can be no apologising between you and me. If I can make each of you understand the truth there is not I think any doubt but that you will be brought together.'

'If he can be made to see the truth, it may be so. I do not know that there is any

seeing of the truth necessary on the other side. I have complained of nothing. He has taken upon himself to leave me for some cause as to which I am perfectly in the dark. However we will not talk about it now.' Then she put Lady Grant into the fly and took her home.

There was nothing more said about it on that day. Mrs. Western, in whose bosom something of her feeling of anger against her husband was most unjustly extended towards Lady Grant, took care that they two should not be at once left together again. Mrs. Holt was studiously civil, but always with a feeling that Mr. Western and Lady Grant were brother and sister. It was probable that the sister would take her brother's part and consequently be at any moment converted into an enemy. The first evening at Exeter was passed very uncomfortably by the three ladies. But on the following morning a conference was de-

manded. 'My dear,' said Lady Grant, 'we have got to discuss all this and we may as well do it at once. What does your husband mean when he says that you were still engaged to Sir Francis when you became engaged to him?'

'Has he said so?'

'Yes; indeed.'

'Then he has said what is altogether untrue. Nor is there the slightest ground for such an untruth. Everything between me and Sir Francis Geraldine was over before we had gone to the Continent. Why; I left England in consequence of the shock it gave me to have to abandon him. Does he know,—does your brother know what I told you?'

'He did not know it when he wrote to me.'

'I suppose not. I should think he would send some message. As a rule he is soft-hearted, although to me he has become suddenly so inexpressibly cruel.'

'But you understand now the cause of his displeasure?'

'Not in the least,' said the angry wife. 'I know of no cause for his displeasure. Displeasure! I know of no cause to justify a step so terrible as this.'

'Though the statement may be untrue as you say——'

'It is untrue. It is altogether untrue.'

'But he has believed it!'

'Why has he believed it? Why; why?'

'Ah indeed; why?' said Lady Grant. 'I suppose that no lie becomes prevalent in the world for evil without some fault on the part of somebody. Even though it may not have been expressed in exact terms, some false person has intentionally spread it abroad. And then a man in his wrath, when he hears the lie will distort it, and twist it, and aggravate it,—to his own wrong and to that of others.'

'But my own husband! Him whom I so passionately loved!'

'And who so passionately loved you! It was because of that that the lie has so rankled! And, Cecilia, dear, let us be altogether open to each other.'

'I have concealed nothing from you,' said Mrs. Western proudly.

'Nor wilfully from him. But you had kept from him a detail of your past life,—of your life not long since past, which, as you yourself felt, ought to have been made known to him.'

'It would have been made known to him.'

'Just so. But unfortunately he was first allowed to hear it from another quarter. How it was told from thence you and I do not know.'

'I saw the letter to him from Sir Francis Geraldine. There was no such statement in it as that you have now made. The tone of the letter was ungentlemanlike and abominable; but the facts as declared were true.'

'Do you believe then that he has invented this falsehood against you, to excuse himself?'

'No,' said the deserted wife; 'I do not think he invented it.'

'Nor I. How was it then that the idea has made its way into his brain?'

'He is suspicious,' said Mrs. Western, speaking very slowly.

'Yes; he is suspicious. It is the fault of his character. But he is true and honest, and affectionate, and is by no means exacting or self-seeking. You have no right to expect that your husband should be perfect;—nor has he a right to expect it of you. He had no idea of this engagement till it was told by him who of all men was bound not to tell him.'

The conversation was carried on after this for a considerable time, but was left chiefly in the hands of Lady Grant. Two or three times Mrs. Western put in a word, but it was always to ask what might be the effect upon him when

he should have learned the tidings which she had sent him. Lady Grant seemed to think that he would of course come back and again take his wife to his bosom, as soon as he should be made to understand all the exact facts as to her intercourse with Sir Francis Geraldine and as to her quarrel with him. But poor Cecilia seemed to believe more in the coming of the little stranger. 'He can reject me,' she once said, with mingled bitterness and hope, 'but I cannot believe that such as he should reject his own child.'

But neither then nor on the following day, which was the last that Lady Grant allowed herself at Exeter, could she be induced to send to her husband a single word asking his pardon. 'No,' she said, holding her head aloft as she spoke; 'it is for me to pardon him. If he wants my pardon he shall have it. He need not ask for it, but if he comes he shall have it.'

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS ALTIFIORLA RISES IN THE WORLD.

During this time a correspondence, more or less regular, was maintained between Miss Altifiorla and Sir Francis Geraldine. Sir Francis had gone to Scotland for the shooting, and rather liked the interest of Miss Altifiorla's letters. It must be understood that it had commenced with the lady rather than the gentleman. But that was a fact of which he was hardly aware. She had written him a short note in answer to some questions he had asked respecting Mrs. Western when he had been in Exeter, and this she had done in such a manner as to make sure of the coming

of a further letter. The further letter had come and thus the correspondence had been commenced. It was no doubt chiefly in regard to Mrs. Western; or at first pretended to be so. Miss Altifiorla thought it right to speak always of her old friend with affectionate kindness;—but still with considerable severity. The affectionate kindness might go for what it was worth; but it was the severity, or rather the sarcasm, which gratified Sir Francis. And then Miss Altifiorla gradually adopted a familiar strain into which Sir Francis fell readily enough. In fact Sir Francis found that a young woman who would joke with him, and appear to follow his lead in her joking, was more to his taste than an austere beauty such as had been his last love.

'Lady Grant is here at this moment,' Miss Altifiorla said in one of her letters. She had by this time fallen into that familiar style of

writing which hardly declared whether it belonged to a man's letter or a woman's. 'I suppose you know who Lady Grant is. She is your fortunate rival's magnificent widowed sister, and has come here I presume to endeavour to set matters right. Whether she will succeed may be doubtful. She is the exact ditto of her brother, who of all human beings gives himself the finest airs. But Cecilia since her separation has given herself airs too, and now leads her lonely life with her nose high among the stars. Poor dear Cecilia! her misfortunes do not become her, and I think they have hardly been deserved. They are all the result of your bitter vengeance, and though I must say that she in sort deserves it, I think that you might have spared her. After all she has done you no harm. Consider where you would be with Cecilia Holt for your wife and guardian. Hard though

you are, I do not think you would have been hard enough to treat her as he has done. Indeed there is an audacity about his conduct to which I know no parallel. Fancy a man marrying a wife and then instantly bidding her go home to her mother because he finds that she once liked another man better than himself! I wonder whether the law couldn't touch him! But you have escaped from all that, and I really can't understand why you should be so awfully cruel to the poor girl.' Then she signed herself 'Yours always, F. A.' as though she had not been a woman at all.

In all this there was much guile. She had already taken the length of his foot, and knew how to flatter him, and to cheat him at the same time. 'That poor young woman of mine seems to have got into difficulties,' he said to Dick Ross, who had gone down with him to Scotland.

'You have made the difficulties for her,' said Dick.

'Well; I paved the way perhaps. That was only justice. Did she think that she was going to hit me and that she wasn't to be hit in return?'

'A woman,' growled Dick.

'Women are human beings the same as men, and when they make themselves beasts have got to be punished. You can't horse-whip a woman; but if you look at it all round I don't see that she ought to get off so much better than a man. She is a human creature and ought to be made to feel as a man feels.'

But this did not suit Dick's morality or his sense of chivalry. According to his thinking a woman in such matters ought to be allowed to do as she pleased, and the punishment, if punishment there is to be, must come from the outside 'I shouldn't like to have done it; that's all.'

'You've always treated women well; haven't you?'

'I don't say that. I don't know that I've ever treated anybody particularly well. But I never set my wits to work to take my revenge on a woman.'

'Look here, old fellow,' said Sir Francis. 'You had better contrive to make yourself less disagreeable or else you and I must part. If you think that I am going to be lectured by you, you're mistaken.'

'You ask me, and how can I help answering you? It was a shabby trick. And now you may bluster as much as you please.' Then the two sat together, smoking in silence for five minutes. It was after breakfast on a rainy day, such as always made Dick Ross miserable for the time. He had to think of creditors whom he could not pay, and of his future life which did not lie easily open be

fore him, and of all the years which he had misused. Circumstances had lately thrown him much into the power of this man whom he heartily disliked and despised, but at whose hands he had been willing to accept many of the luxuries of his life. But still he resolved not to be put down in the expression of his opinions, although he might in truth be turned off at a moment's notice. 'You are corresponding with that old woman now?'

'What do you know about my correspondence?'

'I know just what you told me. That letter there is from the lady with the Italian name. She has more mischief even than you have, I believe.' At hearing this Sir Francis only laughed. 'If you don't take care she'll make you marry her, and then where will you be?'

'Where would you be, old fellow?'

'It don't much matter where I should be,'

said poor Dick. 'There's a revolver upstairs and I sometimes think that I had better use it. I've nothing but myself to look after. I've no baronetcy and no estate, and can destroy none but myself. You can't hurt me very much. I'll tell you what it is, Geraldine. You want a wife so that you may cut out your cousin from the property. You're a good-looking fellow and you can talk, and, as chance would have it, you had, I imagine, got hold of a true lady. But she found you out.'

'What did she find out?'

'The sort of fellow that you are. She met you among the Dean's people, and had to find you out before she knew you. However she did before it was too late, and she gave you the sack.'

'That's your idea.'

'She did,' said Dick boldly. 'And there should have been an end of it. I don't say but

what it might have been as well for you as for her. But it suited you to have your revenge, and you've had it.'

'I rather think I have,' said Sir Francis.

'But you've got a woman to help you in getting it who seems to have been as spiteful as you, without any excuse. I shouldn't think that she'd make a good wife. But if you don't take care she'll be yours.' Then Dick got up and walked out of the room with his pipe in his mouth, and went into his bedroom, thinking that it might be as well for him to pack up and take his departure. The quarters they were in were, as he declared to himself, 'beastly' in wet weather; but his shirts hadn't come from the wash, and he had no vehicle to take him to the railway station without sending for a fly. And after all what he had said to Sir Francis was not much worse than what had often been said before. So he chucked off his slippers, and

threw himself upon the bed, thinking that he might as well endeavour to get through the morning by going to sleep.

Sir Francis when he found himself alone began to think over all the circumstances of his present position. Among those circumstances Dick Ross was one. When he had intended to marry Miss Holt he had determined to get rid of Dick. Indeed Dick had been got rid of partially, and had begun to talk of going to Canada or the Cannibal Islands, by way of beginning the work of his life. Then Sir Francis had been jilted, and Dick had again become indispensable to him. But Dick had ever had a nasty way of speaking his mind and blowing up his patron, which sometimes became very oppressive to the Baronet. And now at the present moment he was more angry with him for what he had said as to Miss Altifiorla than for his remarks as to his conduct to the other

lady. All that was simply severe in Dick's words he took for a compliment. If Dick found fault with his practice he at any rate acknowledged his success. But his remarks as to the second lady had been very uncourteous. He had declared that she with the Italian name was a worse devil even than himself, and had warned him not to marry the fiend. Now he had nearly made up his mind that he would marry her. With all the ladies with whom he had hitherto been connected he had become aware that, in marrying them, he must more or less alter his manner of life. With Miss Altifiorla no such alteration would be necessary. He attributed a certain ease which she possessed to her Italian blood, and thought that he would be able to get on with her very comfortably. To marry was imperative with him,—because of his cousin. But he thought that were he to marry Miss Altifiorla he might continue to live

his ordinary life almost without interruption. He had considered that in doing so he need not even dismiss Dick Ross. But now, in consequence partly of the great discourtesy of Dick's remarks and partly from his strong inclination for Miss Altifiorla, he began to think that after all Dick had better go. Just at this moment Dick's fortunes were, he knew, very low. One sum of money had been lost at cards, and another sum of money had not come. Dick's funds were almost absolutely worn out. But that was only a reason the more for parting with him. He did not care to have to deal with a man who had to wear out his old clothes in his house because he had not credit with his tailor to get a new coat and trousers. He thought that he would part with Dick; but he had not quite made up his mind when he sat down to write his letter to Miss Altifiorla.

'My dear Miss Altifiorla,' he said. 'I really

don't see that you have any reason to blow me up as you do about "poor Cecilia." I do not think that poor Cecilia has had it at all hotter than she has deserved; and when you tell me that I have been awfully cruel to the poor girl, you seem to forget that the poor girl began the war by being awfully cruel to me. If you and I should ever come to know each other, you may be sure that I shall never treat any woman well because she has treated me badly. It's a kind of gallantry I cannot understand, and must make a man's conduct quite indifferent to the sex generally. If you're to treat all alike, whether they run straight or bolt, why shouldn't they all bolt? It would come to the same thing in the end. There is Dick Ross been making himself uncommonly disagreeable on the same subject. I don't mind your lecturing me a little,—chiefly because you don't think it; but I'll be hanged if I take it from him. He has

not done so very well himself that he is entitled to blow up anyone.

'Mind you write and tell me what happens over at St. David's.' (Mrs. Holt lived in Exeter at St. David's.) 'I shall be glad to know whether that respectable person, Mr. Western, comes back again. I don't think she'll have a good time if he does, and if he don't I sha'n't break my heart.' Then he put his pen down and sat for a while thinking what should be his last paragraph. Should he put an end to all his doubts and straightway make his offer, or should he dally a little longer and still keep the power in his own hands? At last he said to himself that even if he wrote it his letter would not go till to-morrow morning, and he would have the night to think about it. This consideration got the better of his prudence and he did write it, simply beginning a new sentence on the page. 'Don't you think that you and I

know each other well enough to make a match of it? There is a question for you to answer on your own behalf, instead of blowing me up for any cruelty to Cecilia Holt.'

Then he signed his name, 'Yours ever, F. G.'

Miss Altifiorla when she received the letter was surprised, but not startled. She had expected that it would come, but not so quickly; and it may be said of her that she had quite made up her mind as to the final answer to be given if it should come. But still she had to think much about it before she wrote her reply. It might be very well for him to be sudden, but any over-suddenness on her part would put him on his guard. If he should be made to feel alarmed at what he had done, if he should be once frightened at his own impetuousness and hers, he would soon find his way back again out of the difficulty. But still she must

flatter him, still she must make him think that she loved him. It would not at all do for her to write as though the thing were impossible. Then in a pleasant reverie she gave herself up for a while to meditating over the sudden change which had come upon her views of life. She remembered how strong she had been in recommending Cecilia not to marry this man, and how she had congratulated her when she found that she had escaped. And she remembered the severe things she had said about Mr. Western. But in her thoughts there was nothing of remorse or even of regret. 'Well, well; that it should have come to this! That he should have escaped from Cecilia and have chosen me! Upon the whole it will be much better for him. I shall tread on his corns less than she would, and be less trodden upon, too, than she. It may be that I must tread on his corns a little, but I will not begin till after my

marriage.' Such was the nature of her thoughts. Perhaps an idea did creep in as to some awkwardness when she should meet Cecilia. But they could never see much of each other, and it might be that there would be no such meeting. 'What does it matter?' she said, as she turned to her writing-table.

But this was not till three days had passed after the receipt of the proposal. Three days, she thought, was a fitting time to show that, though hurried by an affair of so much moment, she was not too much hurried. And then she wrote as follows:—

'My dear Sir Francis,

'Your letter has almost taken away my breath. Why, you know nothing or little about me! And since we have been acquainted with each other our conversation has chiefly been about another lady to whom you were engaged

to be married. Now you ask me to be your wife; at least, if I understand your letter, that is its purport. If I am wrong, of course you will tell me so.

'But of course I know that I am not wrong; and of course I am flattered, and of course pleased. What I have seen of you I have altogether liked, and I do not know why we should not be happy together. But, marriage! marriage is a most important step,—as, no doubt, you are well aware. Though I am quite earnest in what I am saying, still I cannot but smile, and can fancy that you are smiling, as though after all it were but a joke. However, give me but one week to think of it all, and then I will answer you in sober earnest.

'Yours ever (as you sign yourself),

'F. A'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MAN'S PRIDE.

About a week after Lady Grant had gone, Mrs. Western received a letter from her husband. She had expected that he would write, and had daily looked for the letter. But when it did come she did not know whether to take it as a joy or a source of additional discomfort. There was in it hardly a word of declared affection. Nothing was said as to his future life or hers; but he did write, as she thought, in a familiar and loving strain as to the event which had yet to be expected for many months. 'My sister has told me your news,' he said, 'and I cannot but let you know how anxious I shall

be both for your safety and for that of the stranger. If there be anything that I can do for your comfort, if you will ask me, you may be sure that it will be done. I am still at Dresden, and have no idea of immediately returning to England.' There was no commencement to this, nor any ending. He did not even sign his name, nor call her his wife, or his dear Cecilia. Upon the whole she felt that it rather confirmed her sentence of banishment than gave her reason for hope. He had felt when he wrote it that he could not remain altogether silent, but had yet determined to awaken no hopes by an assurance of his returning love. 'In fact, the letter,' she said to her mother, 'must be taken as meaning nothing. He did not choose to subject himself to the charge of having been indifferent to the coming of such an event. But beyond this he had nothing to say to me.' Poor Mrs. Holt remained

altogether silent when her daughter discussed the subject. She knew that she could not speak without loud abuse, and she knew also that her daughter would not allow her to abuse him.

Cecilia, without asking the advice of anyone, resolved that she would not answer the letter. She could not write without using affectionate language, and such words should never come from her till she had first been addressed with full affection by him. 'Never,' she had said to herself a score of times; 'never!' The meaning of this had been that having been so cruelly ill-used she would do and say nothing that might be taken as evidence that she had thought herself in the wrong. She would bear it all rather than give him to understand that she did not appreciate his cruelty. She had told him of her love, and he had not vouchsafed to say a word to her in reply. It was of the injustice done

to her that she complained in the words which she was constantly framing for herself; but it was the apparent want of affection which was deepest in her heart. Though he had been twice as cruel, twice as hard, she would have been less unhappy had she succeeded in drawing from him one word of affection. 'What can he do for my comfort?' she said to herself again and again. 'He means that if I want money I shall have it, so that he may avoid the disgrace of leaving his wife and his child unprovided for. I will not have his money, unless he also come himself.' She would not even write to Lady Grant, or let her know that she had received a letter from her husband. 'Oh, yes; I have heard from him. There is his letter,' and she flung the document across the table to her mother. Having done so she at once left the room, so that there should be no discussion on the

matter. 'That there should be not a word of love in it; not a single word,' she went on saying to herself. 'How hard must be a man's heart, and how changeable! He certainly did love me, and now it has all gone, simply through an unworthy suspicion on his own part.'

But here she showed how little able she had been as yet to read the riddle of a man's heart,—how ignorant she had been of the difficulty under which a man may labour to express his own feeling! That which we call reticence is more frequently an inability than an unwillingness to express itself. The man is silent, not because he would not have the words spoken, but because he does not know the fitting words with which to speak. His dignity and his so-called manliness are always near to him, and are guarded, so that he should not melt into open ruth. So it was

with Mr. Western. Living there all alone at Dresden, seeing no society, passing much of his time in a vain attempt to satisfy himself with music and with pictures, he spent all his hours in thinking how necessary his wife had made herself to his comfort during the few months that they were married. He had already taught himself to endeavour to make excuses for her,—though in doing so he always fell back at last on the enormity of her offence. Though he loved her, though he might probably pardon her in his weakness, it was impossible that the sin should be washed out. His anger still burned very hotly, because he could not quite understand the manner in which the sin had been committed. There was a secret, and he did not know the nature of the secret. There had been an understanding, of which he did not even yet know the nature, between his wife and that base

baronet. And then the terrible truth of his memory added to his wounds. He thought of all the words that had been spoken, and which he felt ought to have given her an opportunity of telling the truth,—and would have done so had she not purposely kept the secret. He had playfully asked her how it had been that she had loved no other man, and then she had remained silent in a manner which he now declared to himself to be equal to a falsehood. And when he had been perfectly free with his own story, she had still kept back hers. She had had her story, and had resolved that he should not know it, even though he had been so open with his. He no doubt had been open at a time when he had no right to expect her to be equally so; but when the time did come then, then she had been a traitor to him. When accepting his caresses, and returning them with all a young wife's ardour, even at that moment

she had been a traitor to him. Though in his arms she had thought,—she must have continued to think,—of some unholy compact which existed between her and Sir Francis Geraldine. And even now she had not told him the nature of that compact. Even now she might be corresponding with Sir Francis or seeing him for aught that he knew to the contrary. How was it possible that he should pardon a wife who had sinned against him as she had sinned?

And yet he was so far aware of his own weakness, as to admit to himself that he would have taken her back to him if she had answered his last letter in a contrite spirit and with affectionate words. He would have endeavoured to forgive if not to forget, and would have allowed himself to fall into the loving intimacy of domestic life,—but that she was cold and indifferent, as well as treacherous.

So he told himself, keeping his wrath hot, though at the same time his love nearly mastered him. But in truth he knew nothing of things as they really were. He had made the mistake of drawing a false conclusion from some words written by Sir Francis, and then of looking upon those words as containing the whole truth. Sir Francis had no doubt intended him to think that he and Cecilia Holt had come to some rupture in their engagement from other than the real cause. He had intended Mr. Western to believe that they had both agreed, and that they had merely resolved between them that they had better not be husband and wife. He had intended to convey the idea that he had been more active in so arranging it than Cecilia herself. Cecilia though she had read the letter had done so in such a frame of mind as hardly to catch the truth. But he, Mr. Western, had caught it

altogether, and had believed it. Though he knew that the man was a dishonest liar yet he had believed the letter. He was tortured at the thought that his wife should have made herself a party to such a compact, and that the compact should still have remained in existence without his knowledge. Although there were hours during which he was most anxious to return to her,—in which he told himself that it was more difficult to stay away from her than even to endure her faithlessness; though from day to day he became convinced that he could never return to the haunts of men or even to the easy endurance of life without her, yet his pride would ever come back to him and assure him that as a reasonable man he was unable to put up with such treachery. He had unfortunately been taught to think, by the correspondence which had come from the matter of his cousin's racing bet, that Sir

Francis Geraldine was the very basest of mankind. It was unfortunate because he had no doubt been induced to think worse of his wife because she had submitted herself and continued to submit herself to a man who was in his eyes so contemptible. He could not endure the idea that a woman for whom such a partnership had had charms should be the chosen companion of all his hours. He had already lived with her for weeks which should have been enough to teach him her character. During those weeks he had been satisfied to the very full. He had assured himself frequently that he had at last met a woman that suited him and made her his own. Had he known nothing of Sir Francis Geraldine he would have been thoroughly contented. Then had come the blow, and all his joys were 'sicklied over' with the unhealthy tone which his image of her former lover gave him. She

became at once to him a different creature. Though he told himself that she was still the same Cecilia as had been his delight, yet he told himself also that she was not the same as he had fancied her when he at first knew her.

There is in a man a pride of which a woman knows nothing. Or rather a woman is often subject to pride the very opposite. The man delights to think that he has been the first to reach the woman's heart. The woman is rejoiced to feel that she owns permanently that which has been often reached before. The man may know that in his own case it is not so with him. But as there has been no concealment, or perhaps only a little to conceal, he takes it as it comes and makes the best of it. His Mary may have liked some other one, but it has not gone farther. Or if she has been engaged as a bride there

has been no secret about it. Or it has been a thing long ago so that there has been time for new ideas to form themselves. The husband when he does come knows at any rate that he has no ground of complaint, and is not kept specially in the dark when he takes his wife. But Mr. Western had been kept specially in the dark, and was of all men the least able to endure such treatment. To have been kept in the dark as to the man with whom the girl was engaged, as he thought, at the very moment in which she had accepted him! To have been made use of as a step, on which a disadvantageous marriage might be avoided without detriment to her own interest! It was this feeling which made him utterly prostrate,—which told him that death itself would be the one desirable way out of his difficulties if death were within his reach.

When he received the letter from his sister

telling him that he might probably become the father of a child, he was at the first prepared to say that thus would they two be reconciled. He could hardly live apart, not only from the mother of his child, but from the child itself. He went away into solitude and wept hot tears as he thought of it all. But ever as he thought of it the cause of his anger came back to him and made him declare to himself that in the indulgence of no feeling of personal tenderness ought he to disgrace himself. At any rate it could not be till she should have told him the whole truth,—till she should have so told her story as to enable him to ascertain whether that story were in all respects true. At present, as he said to himself, he was altogether in the dark. But in fact had he now learned the very story as it had existed, and had Cecilia told it as far as she was able to tell it all, she would even in

his estimation have been completely white-washed. In her perfect absolution from the terrible sin of which he now accused her he would have forgiven and forgotten altogether the small, the trifling fault, which she had in truth committed.

There was something of nobility in all these feelings;—but then that something was alloyed by much that was ignoble. He had resolved that were she to come back to him she must come acknowledging the depth of her sin. He would endeavour to forgive though he could not forget; but he never thought to himself in these hours that it would be well for him to be gracious in his manner of forgiveness. To go to her and fetch her home to him, and say to her that all that was past should be as a dream, a sad and ugly dream, but one to which no reality was attached, never occurred to him. He must still be the

master, and, in order that his masterdom might be assured, full and abject confession must be made. Yet he had such an idea of his wife, that he felt that no such confession would be forthcoming, and therefore to him it appeared ever more and more impossible that they two should again come together.

With Cecilia the matter was regarded with very different eyes. To her, too, it was apparent that she had been treated with extremest cruelty. She, too, was very hot in her anger. In discussing the matter with herself, she allowed herself thoughts in which indignation against her husband was maintained at a boiling heat. But nevertheless she had quite resolved to forgive him altogether if he would once come to her. And to insure her forgiveness no word even of apology should be necessary. She knew that she would have to deal with a man to whom the speaking of such

words would be painful, and none should be expected, none asked for. If he would but show her that he still loved her, that should suffice. The world around them would of course know that she had been sent away from him, and then taken back. There was in this much that was painful,—a feeling full of dismay as she reflected that all her friends, that her acquaintance, that the very servants should know that she had been so disgraced. But of all that she would take no notice,—no notice as far as the outside world was concerned. Let them think, let them talk as they would, she would then have her one great treasure with which to console herself, and that treasure, if once more her own, would suffice for her happiness. In her hottest anger she told herself from time to time that her anger would all depart from her,—that it would be made to vanish from

her as by a magician's wand,—if she could only once more be allowed to feel his arm round her waist.

In all this she had no friend with whom to discuss either her anger or her hopes. Her mother she knew shared her anger to the full, but entertained hopes altogether different. Her desires were so different that they hardly amounted to hopes. Yes, he might be allowed to return, but with words of absolute contrition, with words which should always be remembered against him. Such would have been Mrs. Holt's expression as to the state of things had she ventured to express herself. But she understood enough of her daughter's feelings to repress them.

The only person who sympathised with Cecilia and her present condition was the girl who had once before evoked from her so strong a feeling of tenderness. She did know

that the man had to be forgiven, terrible as had been his sin, and that nothing more was to be said about it. 'Oh, ma'am,' she said, 'he'll come back now! I'm sure he'll come back now, and never more have any of them silly vagaries.'

'Who can say what vagaries a man may choose to indulge?'

'That's true too, ma'am. That any man should have had such a vagary as this! But he's dying to come back. I'm sure of it. And when he does come and finds that he's let to come quiet, and that he's asked to say nothing as he don't like, and that you are all smiles to him and kindness,—and then with the baby coming and all,—my belief is that he'll be happier then than he was even the first day when he had you.' This, though spoken in rough language, so exactly expressed Cecilia's wishes, that she did feel that her maid at least entirely sympathised with her.

CHAPTER XIX.

DICK TAKES HIS FINAL LEAVE.

When Sir Francis received the reply which Miss Altifiorla sent to his letter, he was not altogether satisfied with it. He had expected that the lady would at once have flown into his arms. But the lady seemed to hesitate, and asked for a week to think about it. This showed so much ingratitude on her part,—was so poor an acknowledgment of the position which he had offered her, that the was inclined to be indignant. 'D—— it; if she don't care about it she sha'n't have it.' It was thus that he expressed himself aloud in the hearing of Dick Ross; but without however explaining

who the she was, or what the it was, or indeed in any way asking Dick's opinion on the matter. Not the less had Miss Altifiorla been wise in the nature of the reply which she had given. Had she expressed her warm affection, and at once accepted all that had been proffered, the gentleman would probably have learnt at once to despise that which had been obtained so easily. As it was he was simply cross, and thought that he had determined to withdraw the proposal. But still the other letter was to come, and Miss Altifiorla's chance was still open to her.

The immediate consequence of these doubts in the mind of Sir Francis was a postponement of the verdict of banishment which he had resolved to pronounce against Dick as soon as his marriage with Miss Altifiorla should have been settled. He did not wish to leave himself altogether alone in the world, and if this Dick were dismissed it would be necessary that he

should provide himself with another,—unless he were minded to provide himself with a wife instead. He became therefore gradually more gracious after the little speech which has been above given. Dick had understood perfectly who the 'she' had been, and what was the 'it' intended. As no question had been asked he had made no reply, but he was quite quick enough to perceive the working of the Baronet's mind. He despised the Baronet almost as thoroughly as did Mr. Western. But for certain purposes,—as to which he despised himself also,—the friendship of the Baronet suited him just at present.

One morning, for private reasons of his own, Dick went into Perth, which was twenty miles distant from the Baronet's shooting lodge, and returned the same day bringing the postbag with him from a point in the road at which it was daily left by the postman. Sir Francis

with unusual haste read his letters, and among them was one from Miss Altifiorla. But Dick had a budget of news which he was anxious to reveal, and which he did tell before Sir Francis had said anything as to his own letter. There was another friend, one Captain Fawkes, at the Lodge with them, and Dick had at first been restrained by this man's presence. As soon as he found himself alone with Sir Francis he began. 'Lady Grant has gone off to Dresden,' he said.

'Where did you hear that?' asked the Baronet.

'They told me so at the club. Everybody in Perth knows that she has gone;—and why.'

'What business is it of theirs? Since you know so much about it, why has she gone?'

'To persuade her brother to come home and take his wife once more. It was an in-

fernal shame that they should ever have been separated. In fact she has gone to undo what you did. If she can only succeed in making the man know the whole truth about it, free from all lies, she'll do what she's gone to do.'

'What the devil do you mean by lies?' said Sir Francis, rising in wrath from his chair.

'Well; lies mean lies. As I haven't applied the word to anyone I suppose I may be allowed to use it and to stand by it. I suppose you know what lies mean, and I suppose you are aware that Western has been made to believe lies about his wife.'

'Who told them?'

'I say nothing about that,' said Dick. 'Lies are a sort of thing which are very commonly told, and are ordinarily ascribed to the world at large. The world never quarrels with the accusation. The world has told most

infernal lies to this man about his wife. I don't suppose the world means to call me out for saying as much as that.' Then the two remained silent for some moments and Dick proceeded with his eloquence. 'Of course there have been lies,—damnable lies. Had a man, or a woman,—it's all one,—gone to that poor creature with a pistol in his hand and blown her brains out he wouldn't have done a more dastardly action.'

'What the devil do you mean by that?' said the other.

'I'm not talking about you,—specially. I say lies have been told; but I do not say who has told them. I rather suspect a woman to be at the bottom of it.' Sir Francis who had in his pocket a most tender and loving reply from Miss Altifiorla knew very well who was the lady to whom Dick referred. 'That man has been made to believe certain things about

his wife which are all lies,—lies from beginning to end.'

'He has been made to believe that she was engaged to me first. Is that a lie?'

'That depends on the way in which it was told. He didn't send her home merely for that. I am not saying what the lies were, but they were damnable lies. You sometimes tell me that I ain't any better than another,—or generally a great deal worse. But I'd rather have blown my brains out than have told such lies about a woman as have been told here by somebody. You ask me what they were saying at the club in Perth. Now you know it pretty well all.'

It must be supposed that what had passed at the club had induced Dick to determine that it would no longer become him to remain with Sir Francis as his humble friend. Very evil things had in truth been said of Sir Francis,

and they were more than Dick could endure. The natural indignation of the man was aroused, so that by degrees it had come to pass that he hated the Baronet. He had before said very sharp words to him, but had now gone home resolved in his righteous mind to bring things to a conclusion. It matters little in the telling of our story to know what lies Dick did in truth impute to his friend; but they were of a nature to fill his mind with righteous wrath and to produce from him the eloquence above described.

Sir Francis, whose vanity had been charmed by the letter which he kept in his pocket, had already made up his mind to part with Dick. But Dick's words as now spoken left him no alternative. It was a question with him whether he could not so part with him as to inflict some further punishment. 'Why, Dick,' he said smiling, 'you have broken out quite in a new place.'

'I know nothing about that.'

'You must have been with the Bishop and taken a lesson in preaching. I never heard you come out so strong before.'

'I wish you'd heard what some of those men at Perth said about you.'

'And how you answered them as my friend.'

'As far as I remember I didn't say much myself. What I did say certainly was not in your favour. But I was hardest on that sweet young lady with the Italian name. You won't mind that because you and she are two, now.'

'Can you tell me, Ross, how long you have been eating my bread?'

'I suppose I could.'

'Or how much you have drank of my wine?'

'I haven't made a calculation of that nature. It isn't usual.'

'For shooting here, how much have you ever contributed?'

'When I shoot I contribute nothing. All the world understands that.'

'How much money do you owe me?'

'I owe you nothing that I've ever promised to pay.'

'And now you think it a sign of a fine gentleman to go and talk openly at a club about matters which you have heard from me in confidence! I don't. I think it a very——'

'A very what, Sir Francis? I have not done as you allege. But you were going to observe a very——; what was it?' It must be here explained that Dick Ross was not a man who feared many things; but that Sir Francis feared much. Dick had little to lose by a row, whereas the Baronet would be injured. The Baronet therefore declined to fill in the epithet which he had omitted. He knew from former

experience what Dick would and what he would not bear.

'I don't choose to descend to Billingsgate,' said Sir Francis. 'I have my own ideas as to your conduct.'

'Very gentlemanlike, isn't it?' said Dick, with a smile, meaning thereby to impute it to Sir Francis as cowardice that he was unwilling to say the reverse.

'But, under all the circumstances, it will be quite as well that you should leave the Lodge. You must feel that yourself.'

'Oh; quite so. I am delighted to think that I shall be able to leave without having had any unpleasant words. Perhaps to-morrow will do?'

'Just as you please.'

'Then I shall be able to add a few drops to all those buckets of claret which you threw in my teeth just now. I wonder whether any

gentleman was ever before asked by another gentleman how much wine he had drank in his house, or how many dinners he had eaten. When you asked me did you expect me to pay for my dinners and wine?' Sir Francis refused to make any reply to this question. 'And when you delicately hinted at my poverty, had you found my finances to be lower than you'd always known them? It is disagreeable to be a penniless younger brother. I have found it so all my life. And I admit that I ought to have earned my bread. It would have been much better for me had I done so. People may declare that I am good for nothing, and may hold me up as an example to be shunned. But I flatter myself that nobody has called me a blackguard. I have told no lies to injure men behind their backs;—much less have I done so to injure a woman. I have sacrificed no girl to my revenge, simply because she has thrown me

over. In the little transactions I have had I have always run straight. Now I think that upon the whole I had better go before dinner, and not add anything to the bucket of claret.'

'Just as you please,' said Sir Francis. Then Dick Ross left the room and went away to make such arrangements for his departure as were possible to him, and the readers of this story shall see him and hear him no more.

Sir Francis when he was left alone took out Miss Altifiorla's letter and read it again. He was a man who could assume grand manners in his personal intercourse with women, but was peculiarly apt to receive impression from them. He loved to be flattered, and was prone to believe anything good of himself that was said to him by one of them. He therefore took the following letter for more than it was worth.

'My dear Sir Francis,—I know that you

will have been quite quick enough to have understood when you received my former little scrawl what my answer would be. When a woman attempts to deceive a man in such a matter she knows beforehand that the attempt will be vain; and I certainly did not think that I could succeed with you. But yet a feeling of shamefacedness,—what some ladies consider as modesty, though it might more properly be called *mauvaise honte*,—forced me into temporary silence. What could I wish better than to be loved by such a one as you? In the first place there is the rank which goes for much with me. Then there is the money, which I admit counts for something. I would never have allowed myself to marry even if I had chanced to love a poor man. Then there are the manners, and the peculiar station before the world, which is quite separate from the rank. To me these alone are irresistible. Shall

I say too that personal appearance does count for much. I can fancy myself marrying an ugly man, but I can fancy also that I could not do it without something of disgust.' Miss Altifiorla when she wrote this had understood well that vanity and love of flattery were conspicuous traits in the character of her admirer. 'Having owned so much, what is there more to say than that I am the happiest woman between the seas?'

The reader must be here told that this letter had been copied out a second time because in the first copy she had allowed the word girl to pass in the above sentence. Something told her that she had better write woman instead, and she had written it.

'What more is there for me to add to the above except to tell you that I love you with all my heart. Months ago,—it seems to be years now,—when Cecilia Holt had caught

your fancy, I did regard her as the most fortunate girl. But I did not regard you as the happiest of men, because I felt sure that there was a something between you which would not suit. There is an asperity, rather than strictness, about her which I knew your spirit would not brook. She would have borne the battlings which would have arisen with an equal temper. She can indeed bear all things with equanimity —as she does her present position. But you, though you would have battled and have conquered, would still have suffered. I do not think that the wife you now desire is one with whom you will have to wage war. Shall I say that if you marry her whom you have now asked to join her lot with yours, there will be no such fighting? I think that I shall know how to hold my own against the world as your wife. But with you I shall only attempt to hold my own by making myself one with you in all your desires and aspirations.

'I am yours with all my heart, with all my body and soul.

'FRANCESCA.

'I say nothing now about the immediate future, but I hope it will please your Highness to visit your most worthy clerical relations in this cathedral city before long. I shall say nothing to any of your clerical relations as to my prospects in life until I shall have received your sanction for doing so. But the sooner I do receive it the better for my peace of mind.'

Sir Francis was upon the whole delighted with the letter, and the more delighted as he now read it for the third time. 'There is such an air of truth in every word of it.' It was thus that he spoke to himself about the letter as he sucked in the flattery. It was thus that Miss Altifiorla had intended that he should

receive it. She knew herself too well to suspect that her flattery should fail. Not a word of it failed. In nothing was he more gratified than in her allusions to his matrimonial efforts with Miss Holt. She had assured him that he would have finally conquered that strong-minded young woman. But she had at the same time told him of the extreme tenderness of his heart. He absolutely believed her when she whispered to him her secret,—that she had envied Cecilia her lot when Cecilia was supposed to be the happy bride. He quite understood those allusions to his own pleasures and her assurance that she would never interfere with him. There was just a doubt whether a thing so easily got could be worth the keeping. But then he remembered his cousin and determined to be a man of his word.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECRET ESCAPES.

'ALL right. See you soon. Ever yours, F. G.' Such was the entire response which Miss Altifiorla received from her now declared lover. Sir Francis had told himself that he hated the bother of writing love-letters. But in truth there was with him also an idea that it might be as well that he should not commit himself to declarations that were in their nature very strong. It was not that he absolutely thought of any possible future event in which his letters might be used against him, but there was present to him a feeling that the least said might be the soonest mended.

Miss Altifiorla when she received the above

scrawl was quite satisfied with it. She, too, was cautious in her nature, but not quite so clever as her lover. She did, indeed, feel that she had now caught her fish. She would not let him escape by any such folly as that which Cecilia Holt had committed. The Baronet should be allowed his full swing till she was entitled to call herself Lady Geraldine. Then, perhaps, there might be a tussle between them as to which should have his own way,—or hers. The great thing at present was to obtain the position, and she did feel that she had played her cards uncommonly well as far as the game had gone at present.

But there came upon her an irresistible temptation to make her triumph known among her friends at Exeter. All her girl friends had got themselves married. There was Mrs. Green, and Mrs. Thorne, and Mrs. Western. Poor Cecilia had not gained much, but still she

was Mrs. Western. Miss Altifiorla did in truth regard herself as Miss Altifiorla with but small satisfaction. She had her theories about women's rights, and the decided advantages of remaining single, and the sufficiency of a lady to stand alone in the world. There was probably some vague glimmering of truth in her ideas; some half-formed belief in her own doctrine. But still it had ever been an uncomfortable creed, and one which she was ready to desert at the slightest provocation. Her friends had all deserted it, and had left her as we say high and dry on the barren bank, while they had been carried away by the fertilising stream. She, too, would now swim down the river of matrimony with a beautiful name, and a handle to it, as the owner of a fine family property. Women's rights was an excellent doctrine to preach, but for practice could not stand the strain of such temptation.

And though in boasting of her good fortune she must no doubt confess that she had been wrong, still there would be much more of glory than of shame in the confession.

It was chance probably that made her tell her secret in the first instance to Mrs. Thorne. Mrs. Thorne had been Maude Hippesley and was niece to Sir Francis Geraldine. Miss Altifiorla had pledged herself to Sir Francis not to make known her engagement at the Deanery. But such pledges go for very little. Mrs. Thorne was not now an inhabitant of Exeter, and was, so to say, the most bosom-friend left to her,—after her disruption from Mrs. Western. Was it probable that such a secret should be kept from a bosom-friend? Mrs. Thorne who had a large circle of friends in the county would hardly have admitted the claim, but she would be more likely to do so after receiving the intimation. Of course it

would be conveyed under the seal of a sacred promise,—which no doubt would be broken as soon as she reached the Deanery. On this occasion she called on Miss Altifiorla to ask questions in reference to 'poor Cecilia.' With herself and the Dean and Mrs. Dean there was real sorrow at Cecilia's troubles. And there was also no mode of acquiring true information. 'Do tell me something about poor Cecilia,' said Mrs. Thorne.

'Poor Cecilia, indeed! She is there all alone and sees almost no one. Of course you've heard that Lady Grant was here.'

'We thought it so nice of Lady Grant to come all the way from Scotland to see her sister-in-law.'

'Lady Grant of course is anxious to get her brother to take back his wife. They haven't a great deal of money among them, and when Mrs. Holt dies Cecilia's fortune would be a nice addition.'

'I don't think Lady Grant can have thought of that,' said Mrs. Thorne.

'Lady Grant would be quite prudent in thinking of it and like the rest of the world. Her husband was only a regimental officer in India who got knighted for doing something that came in his way. There isn't any family property among them, and of course she is anxious.'

This solicitude as to 'family property' on the part of Miss Altifiorla did strike Mrs. Thorne as droll. But she went on with her inquiries. 'And what is Cecilia doing?'

'Not very much,' said Miss Altifiorla. 'What is there for her to do? Poor girl! She has played her cards so uncommonly badly, when she took up with Mr. Western after having been dropped by Sir Francis.'

'After dropping Sir Francis!'

Miss Altifiorla smiled. Was it likely that

Cecilia Holt should have dropped Sir Francis?

'It doesn't much matter now. If it does her wounded pride good to say so of course she can say it.'

'We always believed that it was so at the Deanery.'

'At any rate she made a mess of it. And now she has to bear the fortune which her fates have sent her. I own that I am a little angry with Cecilia, not for having dropped Sir Francis as you called it, but for managing her matters so badly with Mr. Western. She seems to me to have no idea of the sort of duties which fall to the lot of a wife.'

'I should have thought you'd have liked her the better for that,' said Mrs. Thorne, with a smile.

'Why so? I think you must have misunderstood my theory of life. When a woman elects to marry, and does so from sheer love

and regard for the man, she should certainly make her duty to him the first motive of all her actions.'

'What a grand lesson! It is a pity that my husband should not be here to hear it.'

'I have no doubt he finds that you do so.'

'Or Sir Francis Geraldine. I suppose my uncle is still in search of a wife, and if he knew where to find such excellent principles he would be able to make his choice. What a joke it would be should he again try his luck at Exeter?'

'He has again tried his luck at Exeter,' said Miss Altifiorla, in a tone in which some slight shade of ridicule was mixed with the grandiloquence which she wished to assume.

'What on earth do you mean?' said Mrs. Thorne.

'Simply what I seem to mean. I had not intended to have told you at present, though I

would sooner tell you than any person living. You must promise me, however, that it shall go no further. Sir Francis Geraldine has done me the honour to ask me to be his wife.' Thus she communicated her good news; and did so in a tone of voice that was very low, and intended to be humble.

'My uncle going to marry you? Good gracious!'

'Is it more wonderful than that he should have thought of marrying Cecilia Holt?'

'Well, yes. Not that I know why it should be, except that Cecilia came first, and that you and she were so intimate.'

'Was he doomed to remain alone in the world because of that?' asked Miss Altifiorla.

'Well, no; I don't exactly mean that. But it is droll.'

'I hope that the Dean and Mrs. Hippesley will be satisfied with his choice. I do parti-

cularly hope that all his friends will feel that he is doing well. But,' she added, perceiving that her tidings had not been received with any strong expression of family satisfaction—'but I trust that, as Lady Geraldine, I may at any rate be the means of keeping the family together.'

There was to Mrs. Thorne almost a joke in this, as she knew that her father did not at all approve of Sir Francis, and was with difficulty induced to have him at the Deanery. And she knew also that the Dean did in his heart greatly dislike Miss Altifiorla, though for the sake of what was generally called 'peace within the cathedral precincts,' he had hitherto put up also with her. What might happen in the Dean's mind, or what determination the Dean might take when the two should be married, she could not say. But she felt that it might probably be beyond the power of the then Lady Geraldine 'to keep

the family together.' 'Well, I am surprised,' said Mrs. Thorne. 'And I am to tell nobody.'

'I don't see any good in publishing the thing in High Street just at present.' Then Mrs. Thorne understood that she need not treat the communication as a strict secret. 'In fact, I don't see why it should be kept specially in the dark. Francis has not enjoined anything like secrecy.' This was the first time that she had allowed herself the use of the Baronet's name without the prefix. 'When it is to be I have not as yet even begun to think. Of course he is in a hurry. Men, I believe, generally are. But in this case there may be some reasons for delay. Arrangements as to the family property must be made, and Castle Gerald must be prepared for our reception. I don't suppose we can be married just off hand, like some happier folks.' Mrs. Thorne did not know whether to

take this to herself, as she had been married herself at last rather in a scramble, or whether it was intended to apply to poor Cecilia, whose husband, though he was in comfortable circumstances, cannot be said to have possessed family property. 'And now, dear,' continued Miss Altifiorla, 'what am I to do for bridesmaids? You three have all been married before me. There are his two unmarried sisters of course.' Mrs. Thorne was aware that her uncle had absolutely quarrelled with his mother and sisters, and had not spoken to them for years. 'I suppose that it will come off in the cathedral, and that your father will perform the ceremony. I don't know, indeed, whether Francis might not wish to have the Bishop.' Mrs. Thorne was aware that the Bishop, who was a strict man, would not touch Sir Francis Geraldine with a pair of tongs. 'But all these things will shake themselves down comfortably no doubt. In the

meantime I am in a twitter of ecstatic happiness. You, who have gone through it all, will quite understand what I mean. It seems that as a lover he is the most exigeant of gentlemen. He requires constant writing to, and woe betide me if I do not obey his behests. However, I do not complain, and must confess that I am at the present moment the most happy of young women.'

Mrs. Thorne of course expressed her congratulations, and took her departure without having committed herself to a word as to the other inhabitants of the Deanery. But when she got to her father's house, where she was for the present staying, she in truth startled them all by the news. The Dean had just come into the drawing-room to have his afternoon tea and a little gossip with his wife and his own sister, Mrs. Forrester, from London. 'Who do you think is going to be married,

and to whom?' said Mrs. Thorne. 'I'll give you all three guesses apiece, and bet you a pair of gloves all round that you don't make it out.'

'Not Miss Altifiorla?' said her mother.

'That's only one. A marriage requires two personages. I still hold good by my bet.'

'Miss Altifiorla going to be married! said the Dean. 'Who is the unfortunate victim?'

'Papa, do not be ill-natured. Why should not Miss Altifiorla be married as well as another?'

'In the first place, my dear,' said Mrs. Forrester, 'because I understand that the lady has always expressed herself as being in favour of a single life.'

'I go beyond that,' said the Dean, 'and maintain that any single life would be preferable to a marriage with Miss Altifiorla.'

'Considering that she is my friend, papa, I think that you are very unkind.'

'But who is to be the gentleman?' asked her mother.

'Ah! there's the question! Why don't you guess?' Then Mrs. Dean did name three or four of the most unpromising unmarried elderly gentlemen in Exeter, and the Dean, in that spirit of satire against his own order which is common among clergymen, suggested an old widowed Minor Canon, who was in the habit of chanting the Litany. 'You are none of you near the mark. You ought to come nearer home.'

'Nearer home?' said Mrs. Dean with a look of discomfort in her face.

'Yes, mamma. A great deal nearer home.'

'It can't be your Uncle Septimus,' said the Dean. Now Uncle Septimus was the unmarried brother of old Mr. Thorne, and was regarded by

all the Thorne family as a perfect model of an unselfish, fine old lovable gentleman.

'Good gracious, no!' said Mrs. Thorne. 'What a horrible idea! Fancy Uncle Septimus doomed to pass his life in company with Miss Altifiorla! The happy man in question is—— Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'No!' said Mrs. Hippesley, jumping from her seat.

'It is impossible,' said the Dean, who, though he greatly disliked his brother-in-law, still thought something of the family into which he had married, and thoroughly despised Miss Altifiorla. 'I do not think that Sir Francis could be so silly as that.'

'It cannot be,' said Mrs. Hippesley.

'What has the young lady done to make it impossible?' asked Mrs. Forrester.

'Nothing on earth,' said Mrs. Thorne. 'She is my special friend and is in my opinion

a great deal more than worthy of my uncle Francis. Only papa, who dislikes them both, would like to make it out that the two of them are going to cut their own throats each by marrying the other. I wish papa could have heard the way in which she said that he would have to marry them,—unless the Bishop should like to come forward and perform the ceremony.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' said the Dean angrily.

'If you had heard,' continued his daughter, 'all that she had to say about the family name and the family property, and the family grandeur generally, you would have thought her the most becoming young woman in the country to be the future Lady Geraldine.'

'I wish you wouldn't talk of it, my dear,' said Mrs. Hippesley.

'We shall have to talk of it, and had better become used to it among ourselves.

I don't suppose that Miss Altifiorla has invented the story out of her own head. She would not say that she was engaged to marry my uncle if it were not true.'

'It's my belief,' said the Dean, getting up and walking out of the room in great anger, 'that Sir Francis Geraldine will never marry Miss Altifiorla.'

'I don't think my brother will ever marry Miss Altifiorla,' said Mrs. Dean. 'He is very silly and very vicious, but I don't think he'll ever do anything so bad as that.'

'Poor Miss Altifiorla!' said Mrs. Thorne afterwards to her Aunt Forrester.

That same evening Miss Altifiorla, feeling that she had broken the ice, and, oppressed by the weight of the secret which was a secret still in every house in Exeter except the Deanery, wrote to her other friend Mrs. Green, and begged her to come down. She had

tidings to tell of the greatest importance. So Mrs. Green put on her bonnet and came down. 'My dear,' said Miss Altifiorla, 'I have something to tell you. I am going to be——'

'Not married!' said Mrs. Green.

'Yes, I am. How very odd that you should guess. But yet when I come to think of it I don't know that it is odd. Because after all there does come a time in,—a lady's life when it is probable that she will marry.' Miss Altifiorla hesitated, having in the first instance desired to use the word girl.

'That's as may be,' said Mrs. Green. 'Your principles used to be on the other side.'

'Of course all that changes when the opportunity comes. It wasn't so much that I disliked the idea of marriage for myself, as

that I was proud of the freedom which I enjoyed. However that is all over. I am free no longer.'

'And who is it to be?'

'Ah, who is it to be? an you make a guess?'

'Not in the least. I don't know of anybody who has been spooning you.'

'Oh, what a term to use! No one can say that anyone ever——spooned me. It is a horrible word. And I cannot bear to hear it fall from my own lips.'

'It is what young men do do,' said Mrs. Green.

'That I think depends on the rank in life which the young men occupy;—and also the young women. I can understand that a Bank clerk should do it to an attorney's daughter.'

'Well; who is it you are going to marry

without spooning, which in my vocabulary is simply another word for two young people being fond of each other?' Miss Altifiorla remained silent for a while, feeling that she owed it to herself to awe her present companion by her manner before she should crush her altogether by the weight of the name she would have to pronounce. Mrs. Green had received her communication flippantly, and had probably felt that her friend intended to demean herself by some mere common marriage. 'Who is to be the happy swain?' asked Mrs. Green.

'Swain!' said Miss Altifiorla, unable to repress her feelings.

'Well; lover, young man, suitor, husband as is to be. Some word common on such occasion will I suppose fit him?'

Miss Altifiorla felt that no word common on such occasions would fit him. But yet it

was necessary that she should name him, having gone so far. And, having again been silent for a minute, so as to bethink herself in what most dignified language this might be done, she proceeded. 'I am to be allied,'——again there was a little pause,—— 'to Sir Francis Geraldine!'

'Him Cecilia Holt rejected!'

'Him who I think was fortunate enough to escape Cecilia Holt.'

'Goodness gracious! It seems but the other day.'

'Cecilia Holt has since recovered from her wounds and married another husband, and is now suffering from fresh wounds. Is it odd that the gentleman should have found some one else to love when the lady has had time not only to love but to marry, and to be separated from another man?'

'Sir Francis Geraldine!' ejaculated Mrs.

Green. 'Well; I'm sure I wish you all the joy in the world. When is it to be?' But Mrs. Green had so offended Miss Altifiorla by her manner of accepting the news that she could not bring herself to make any further gracious answer. Mrs. Green therefore took her leave, and the fact of Miss Altifiorla's engagement was soon known all over Exeter.

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY GRANT AT DRESDEN.

'You have first to believe the story as I tell it you, and get out of your head altogether the story as you have conceived it.' This was said by Lady Grant to her brother when she had travelled all the way to Dresden with the purpose of inducing him to take his wife back. She had come there solely with that object, and it must be said of her that she had well done her duty as a sister. But she found it by no means easy to induce her brother to look at the matter with her eyes. In fact, it was evident to her that he did not believe the story as she had told it.

She must go on and din it into his ears till by perseverance she should change his belief. He still thought that credit should be given to that letter from Sir Francis, although he was aware that to Sir Francis himself as a man he would have given no credit whatsoever. It had suited his suspicions to believe that there had been something in common between Sir Francis and his wife up to the moment in which the terrible fact of her engagement had been made known to him; and from that belief he could not free his mind. He had already been persuaded to say that she should come back to him; but she should come as a sinner confessing her sin. He would take her back, but as one whom he had been justified in expelling, and to whom he should be held as extending great mercy.

But Lady Grant would not accept of his

mercy, nor would she encourage her coming back with such a purpose. It would not be good in the first place for him that he should think that his wife had been an offender. His future happiness must depend on his fixed belief in her purity and truth. And, as for her,—Lady Grant was sure that no entreaties would induce her to own that she had been in the wrong. She desired to have no pardon asked, but would certainly ask for no pardon on her own behalf.

'Why was it that he came, then, to my house?' asked Mr. Western.

'Am I, or rather is she, to account for the conduct of such a man as that? Are you to make her responsible for his behaviour?'

'She was engaged to him.'

'Undoubtedly. It should have been told to you,—though I can understand the reasons which kept her silent from day to day. The

time will come when you will understand it also, and know, as I do, how gracious and how feminine has been her silence.' Then there came across her brother's face a look of doubt as indicating his feeling that nothing could have justified her silence. 'Yes, George; the time will come that you will understand her altogether although you are far from doing so now.'

'I believe you think her to be perfect,' said he.

'Hardly perfect, because she is a human being. But although I know her virtues I have not known her faults. It may be that she is too proud,—a little unwilling, perhaps, to bend. Most women will bend whether they be in fault or not. But would you wish your wife to do so?'

'I, at any rate, have not asked her.'

'You, at any rate, have not given her the

opportunity. My accusation against you is, that you sent her away from you on an accusation made solely by that man, and without waiting to hear from herself whether she would plead guilty to it.'

'I deny it.'

'Yes; I hear your denial. But you will have to acknowledge it, at any rate to yourself, before you can ever hope to be a happy man.'

'When he wrote to me, I believed the whole story to be a lie from first to last.'

'And when you found that it was not all a lie, then it became to you a gospel throughout. You could not understand that the very faults which had induced her to break her engagement were of a nature to make him tell his story untruly.'

'When she acknowledged herself to have

been engaged to him it nearly broke my heart.'

'Just so. And, with your heart broken, you would not sift the truth. She had committed no offence against you in engaging herself.'

'She should have told me as soon as we knew each other.'

'She should have told you before she accepted your offer. But she had been deterred from doing so by your own revelation to her. You cannot believe that she intended you always to be in the dark. You cannot imagine that she had expected that you should never hear of her adventure with Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'I do not know.'

'I had heard it, and she knew that I had heard it.'

'Why did you not tell me, then?'

'Do you suppose that I wished to interfere between you and your wife? Of course I told her that you ought to know. Of course I told her that you ought to have known it already. But she excused herself,—with great sorrow. Things had presented themselves in such a way that the desired opportunity of telling you had never come.' He shook his head. 'I tell you that it was so, and you are bound to believe it of one of whom in all other respects you had thought well;—of one who loved you with the fondest devotion. Instead of that there came this man with his insidious falsehoods, with his implied lies; this man, of whom you have always thought so badly;—and him you believed instead! I tell you that you can justify yourself before no human being. You were not entitled to repudiate your wife for such offence as she had committed, you are

not entitled even had there been no mutual affection to bind you together. How much less so in your present condition,—and in hers. People will only excuse you by saying that you were mad. And now in order to put yourself right, you expect that she shall come forward, and own herself to have been the cause of this misfortune. I tell you that she will not do it. I would not even ask her to do it;—not for her sake, nor for your own.'

'I am then to go,' said he, 'and grovel in the dust before her feet.'

'There need be no grovelling. There need be no confessions.'

'How then?'

'Go to Exeter, and simply take her. Disregard what all the world may say, for the sake of her happiness and for your own. She will make no stipulation. She will simply throw herself into your arms with unaffected

love. Do not let her have to undergo the suffering of bringing forth your child without the comfort of knowing that you are near to her.' Then she left him to think in solitude over the words she had spoken to him.

He did think of them. But he found it to be impossible to put absolute faith in them. It was not that he thought that his sister was deceiving him, that he distrusted her who had taken this long journey at great personal trouble altogether on his behalf; but that he could not bring himself to believe that he himself had been so cruel as to reject his young wife without adequate cause. It had gradually come across his mind that he had been most cruel, most unjust,—if he had done so; and to this judgment, passed by himself on himself, he would not submit. In concealing her engagement she had been

very wrong, but it must be that she had concealed more than her engagement. And to have been engaged to such a man added much to the fault in his estimation. He would not acknowledge that she had been deceived as to the man's character and had set herself right before it was too late. Why had the man come to his house and asked for him,—after what had passed between them,—if not in compliance with some understanding between him and her? But yet he would take her back if she would confess her fault and beg his pardon,—for then he would be saved the disgrace of having to acknowledge that he had been in fault from the first.

His sister left him alone without saying a word on the subject for twenty-four hours, and then again attacked him. 'George,' she said, 'I must go back to-morrow. I have

left my children all alone and cannot stay longer away from them.'

'Must you go to-morrow?' he asked.

'Indeed, yes. Had not the matter been one of almost more than life and death I should not have come. Am I to return and feel that my journey has been for nothing?'

'What would you have me do?'

'Return with me, and go at once to Exeter.'

He almost tore his hair in his agony as he walked about the room before he replied to her. But she remained silent, watching him. 'You must leave me here till I think about it.'

'Then I might as well not have come at all,' she said.

He moved about the room in an agony of spirit. He knew it to be essential to his future happiness in life that he should be the master in his own house. And he felt that

he could not be so unless he should be known to have been right in this terrible misfortune with which their married life had been commenced. There was no obliterating it, no forgetting it, no ignoring it. He had in his passion sent her away from him, and, passionately, she had withdrawn. Let them not say a word about it, there would still have been this terrible event in both their memories. And for himself he knew that unless it could be settled from the first that he had acted with justice, his life would be intolerable to him. He was a man, and it behoved him to have been just. She was a woman, and the feeling of having had to be forgiven would not be so severe with her. She, when taken a second time into grace and pardoned, might still rejoice and be happy. But for himself, he reminded himself over and over again that he was a man, and assured him-

self that he could never lift up his head were he by his silence to admit that he had been in the wrong.

But still his mind was changed,—was altogether changed by the coming of his sister. Till she had come all had been a blank with him, in which no light had been possible. He could see no life before him but one in which he should be constantly condemned by his fellow-men because of his cruelty to his young wife. Men would not stop to ask whether he had been right or wrong, but would declare him at any rate to have been stern and cruel. And then he had been torn to the heart by his memory of those passages of love which had been so sweet to him. He had married her to be the joy of his life, and she had become so to his entire satisfaction when in his passion he had sent her away. He already knew that he had made a great mistake. Angry as he had been,

he should not have thus sought to avenge himself. He should have known himself better than to think that because she had been in fault he could therefore live without her. He had owned to himself when his sister had come to him that he must use her services in getting his wife once again. Was she not the one human being that suited him at all points? But still,—but still his honour must be saved. If she in truth desired to come back to him, she would not hesitate to own that she had been in fault.

'What am I to say to her? What message will you send to her? You will hardly let me go back without some word.' This was said to him by his sister as he walked about the room in his misery. What message could he send? He desired to return himself, and was willing to do so at a moment's notice if only he could be assured that if he did so she would as a wife do

her duty by owning that she had been in the wrong. How should he live with a wife who would always be asserting to herself, and able to assert to him, that in this extremity of their trouble he had been the cause of it;—not that she would so assert it aloud, but that the power of doing so would be always present to her and to him? And yet he was resolved to return, and if he allowed his sister to go back without him never would there come so fair an opportunity again. 'I have done my duty by you,' said his sister.

'Yes, yes. I need hardly tell you that I am grateful to you.'

'And now do your duty by her.'

'If she will write to me one line to beg me to come I will do so.'

'You have absolutely driven her away from you, and left her abruptly, so that she should have no opportunity of imploring you to spare

her. And now you expect that she should do so?'

'Yes;—if she were wrong. By your own showing she was the first to sin against me.'

'You do not know the nature of a woman, and especially you do not know hers. I have nothing further to say. I shall leave this by the early train to-morrow morning, and you can go with me or let me go alone as you please. I have said what I came to say, and if I have said it without effect it will only show me how hard a man's heart may become by living in the world.' Then she left him alone and went her way.

He took his hat and escaped from the Hotel and walked along the Elbe all alone. He went far down the river, and did not return for many hours. At first his thoughts were full of anger against his sister, though he acknowledged that she had taken great trouble in coming there on

a mission intended to be beneficent to them both. With the view solely of doing her duty to her brother and to her sister-in-law, she had taken infinite trouble; yet he was very angry with her. Being a woman she had most unjustly taken the part of another woman against him. Cecilia would have suffered but little in having been forced to acknowledge her great sin. But he would suffer greatly,—he who had sinned not at all,—by the tacit confession which he would be thus compelled to make. It was true that it was necessary that he should return. The happiness of them all, including that unborn child, required it. His sister knowing this demanded that he should sacrifice himself in order that his wife might be indulged in her pride. And yet he knew that he must do it. Though he might go to her in silence, and in silence renew his married life, he would by so doing confess that he had been wrong.

To such confession he should not be driven. In the very gall of bitterness, and with the sense of injustice strong upon him, he did resolve that he would return to England with his sister. But having so resolved, with his wrath hot against Lady Grant, his mind was gradually turned to Cecilia and her condition. How sweet would it be to have her once again sitting at his table, once again leaning on his arm, once again looking up into his face with almost comical doubt, seeking to find in his eyes what answer he would best like her to make when referring to her for some decision. 'It is your opinion that I want,' he would say. 'Ah! but if I only knew yours I should be so much better able to have one of my own.' Then there would come a look over her face which almost maddened him when he thought that he should never see it again. It was the idea that she who could so look at him should have looked

with the same smile into the face of that other man which had driven him to fury;—that she should have so looked in those very days in which she had gazed into his own.

Could it be that though she had been engaged to the man she had never taken delight in so gazing at him? That girl whom he had thought to make his wife, and who had so openly jilted him, had never understood him as Cecilia had done,—had never looked at him as Cecilia had looked. But he, after he had been so treated,—happily so treated,—had certainly never desired ever to see the girl. But this wife of his, who was possessed of all the charms which a woman could own, of whom he acknowledged to himself day after day that she was, as regarded his taste, peerless and unequalled, she after breaking from that man, that man unworthy to be called a gentleman, still continued to hold intercourse with him! Was it not

clear that she had still remained on terms of ntimacy with him?

His walk along the Elbe was very bitter, but yet he determined to return to England with his sister

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. WESTERN YIELDS.

THE fact that Lady Grant had gone to Dresden was not long in reaching the ears of Mrs. Western. Dick Ross had heard at the club at Perth that she had gone, and had told Sir Francis. Sir Francis passed on the news to Miss Altifiorla, and from her it had reached the deserted wife. Miss Altifiorla had not told it direct, because at that time she and Cecilia were not supposed to be on friendly terms. But the tidings had got about and Mrs. Western had heard them.

'She's a good woman,' said Cecilia to her mother. 'I knew her to be that the first

moment that she came to me. She is rough as he is, and stern, and has a will of her own. But her heart is tender and true;—as is his also at the core.'

'I don't know about that,' said Mrs. Holt, with the angry tone which she allowed herself to use only when speaking of Mr. Western.

'Yes; he is, mamma. In your affection for me you will not allow yourself to be just to him. In truth you hardly know him.'

'I know that he has destroyed your happiness for ever, and made me very wretched.'

'No, mamma; not for ever. It may be that he will come for me, and that then we shall be as happy as the day is long.' As she said this a vision came before her eyes of the birth of her child and of her surroundings at the time;—the anxious solicitude of a loving husband, the care of attendants who would be happy because she was happy, the congratula-

tions of friends, and the smiles of the world. But above all she pictured to herself her husband standing by her bedside with the child in his arms. The dream had been dreamed before, and was re-dreamed during every hour of the day. 'Lady Grant is strong,' she continued, 'and can plead for me better than I could plead myself.'

'Plead for you! Why should there be anyone wanted to plead for you? Will Lady Grant plead with you for her brother?'

'It is not necessary. My own heart pleads for him. It is because he has been in the wrong that an intercessor is necessary for me. It is they who commit the injury that have a difficulty in forgiving. If he came to me do you not know that I should throw myself into his arms and be the happiest woman in the world without a word spoken?' The conversation was not then carried further, but Mrs. Holt con-

tinued to shake her head as she sate at her knitting. In her estimation no husband could have behaved worse than had her son-in-law. And she was of opinion that he should be punished for his misconduct before things could be made smooth again.

Some days afterwards Miss Altifiorla called at the house, and sent in a note while she stood waiting in the hall. In the note she merely asked whether her 'dear Cecilia' would be willing to receive her after what had passed. She had news to tell of much importance, and she hoped that her 'dear Cecilia' would receive her. There had been no absolute quarrel, no quarrel known to the servants, and Cecilia did receive her. 'Oh, my dear,' she said, bustling into the room with an air of affected importance, 'you will be surprised, I think that you must be surprised at what I have to tell you.'

'I will be surprised if you wish it,' said Cecilia.

'Let me first begin by assuring you, that you must not make light of my news. It is of the greatest importance, not only to me, but of some importance also to you.'

'It shall be of importance.'

'Because you begin with that little sneer which has become so common with you. You must be aware of it. Amidst the troubles of your own life, which we all admit to be very grievous, there has come upon you a way of thinking that no one else's affairs can be of any importance.'

'I am not aware of it.'

'It is so a little. And pray believe me that I am not in the least angry about it. I knew that it would be so when I came to you this morning; and yet I could not help coming. Indeed as the thing has now been made known

to the Dean's family I could not bear that you should be left any longer in ignorance.'

'What is the thing?'

'There it is again;—that sneer. I cannot tell you unless you will interest yourself. Does nothing interest you now beyond your own misfortunes?'

'Alas, no. I fear not.'

'But this shall interest you. You must be awaked to the affairs of the world—especially such an affair as this. You must be shaken up. This I suppose will shake you up. If not, you must be past all hope.'

'What on earth is it?'

'Sir Francis Geraldine——! You have heard at any rate of Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'Well, yes; I have not as yet forgotten the name.'

'I should think not. Sir Francis Geraldine has——' And then she paused again.

'Cut his little finger,' said Cecilia. Had she dreamed of what was to come she would not have turned Sir Francis into ridicule. But she had been aware of Miss Altifiorla's friendship with Sir Francis,—or rather what she had regarded as an affectation of friendship, and did not for a moment anticipate such a communication as was to be made to her.

'Cecilia Holt——'

'That at any rate is not my name.'

'I dare say you wish it were.'

'I would not change my real name for that of any woman under the sun.'

'Perhaps not; but there are other women in a position of less grandeur. I am going to change mine.'

'No!'

'I thought you would be surprised because it would look as though I were about to abandon my great doctrine. It is not so. My

opinions on that great subject are not in the least changed. But of course there must be some women whom the exigencies of the world will require to marry.'

'A good many, first and last.'

'About the good many I do not at this moment concern myself. My duty is clearly before me and I mean to perform it. I have been asked to ally myself——;' then there was a pause, and the speaker discovered when it was too late that she was verging on the ridiculous in declaring her purpose of forming an alliance;—'that is to say, I am going to marry Sir Francis Geraldine.'

'Sir Francis Geraldine!'

'Do you see any just cause or impediment?'

'None in the least. And yet how am I to answer such a question? I saw cause or impediment why I should not marry him.'

'You both saw it, I suppose?' said Miss

Altifiorla, with an air of grandeur. 'You both supposed that you were not made for each other, and wisely determined to give up the idea. You did not remain single, and I suppose we need not either.'

'Certainly not for my sake.'

'Our intimacy since that time has been increased by circumstances, and we have now discovered that we can both of us best suit our own interests by an——'

'An alliance,' suggested Mrs. Western.

'If you please,—though I am quite aware that you use the term as a sneer.' As to this Mrs. Western was too honest to deny the truth, and remained silent.

'I thought it proper,' continued Miss Altifiorla, 'as we had been so long friends, to inform you that it will be so. You had your chance, and as you let it slip I trust that you will not envy me mine.'

'Not in the least.'

'At any rate you do not congratulate me.'

'I have been very remiss. I acknowledge it. But upon my word the news has so startled me that I have been unable to remember the common courtesies of the world. I thought when I heard of your travelling up to London together that you were becoming very intimate.'

'Oh, it had been ever so much before that, —the intimacy at least. Of course I did not know him before he came to this house. But a great many things have happened since that; have there not? Well, good-bye, dear. I have no doubt we shall continue as friends, especially as we shall be living almost in the neighbourhood. Castle Gerald is to be at once fitted up for me, and I hope you will forget all our little tiffs, and often come and stay with me.' So saying, Miss Altifiorla, having told

her grand news, made her adieus and went away.

'A great many things have happened since that,' said Cecilia, repeating to herself her friend's words. It seemed to her to be so many that a lifetime had been wasted since Sir Francis had first come to that house. She had won the love of the best man she had ever known, and married him, and had then lost his love! And now she had been left as a widowed wife, with all the coming troubles of maternity on her head. She had understood well the ill-natured sarcasm of Miss Altifiorla. 'We shall be living almost in the same neighbourhood!' Yes; if her separation from her husband was to be continued, then undoubtedly she would live at Exeter, and, as far as the limits of the county were concerned, she would be the neighbour of the future Lady Geraldine. That she

should ever willingly be found under the same roof with Sir Francis was, as she knew well, as impossible to Miss Altifiorla as to herself. The invitation contained the sneer, and was intended to contain it. But it created no anger. She, too, had sneered at Miss Altifiorla quite as bitterly. They had each learned to despise the other, and not to sneer was impossible. Miss Altifiorla had come to tell of her triumph, and to sneer in return. But it mattered nothing. What did matter was whether that threat should come true. Should she always be left living at Exeter with her mother? Then she dreamed her dream again, that he had come back to her, and was sitting by her bedside with his hand in hers and whispering sweet words to her, while a baby was lying in her arms—his child. As she thought of the bliss of the fancied moment, the still possible bliss, her anger seemed to fade

away. What would she not do to bring him back, what would she not say? She had done amiss in keeping that secret so long, and though the punishment had been severe, it was not altogether undeserved. It had come to him as a terrible blow, and he had been unable to suppress his agony. He should not have treated her so; no, he should not have sent her away. But she could make excuses now, which but a few weeks since seemed to her to be impossible. And she understood, she told herself that she understood, the difference between herself as a woman and him as a man. He had a right to command, a right to be obeyed, a right to be master. He had a right to know all the secrets of her heart, and to be offended when one so important had been kept from him. He had lifted his hand in great wrath, and the blow he had struck had been awful. But she would bear

it without a word of complaint if only he would come back to her. As she thought of it, she declared to herself that she must die if he did not come back. To live as she was living now would be impossible to her. But if he would come back, how absolutely would she disregard all that the world might say as to their short quarrel. It would indeed be known to all the world, but what could the world do to her if she once again had her husband by her side? When the blow first fell on her she had thought much of the ignominy which had befallen her, and which must ever rest with her. Even though she should be taken back again, people would know that she had been discarded. But now she told herself that for that she cared not at all. Then she again dreamed her dream. Her child was born, and her husband was standing by her with that sweet manly smile

upon his face. She put out her hand as though he would touch it, and was conscious of an involuntary movement as though she were bending her face towards him for a kiss.

Surely he would come to her! His sister had gone to him, and would have told him the absolute truth. She had never sinned against him, even by intentional silence. There had been no thought of hers since she had been his wife which he had not been welcome to share. It had in truth been for his sake rather than for her own that she had been silent. She was aware that from cowardice her silence had been prolonged. But surely now at last he would forgive her that offence. Then she thought of the words she would use as she owned her fault. He was a man, and as a man had a right to expect

that she would confess it. If he would come to her, and stand once again with his arm round her waist, she would confess it.

'My dear, here is a letter. The postman has just brought it.' She took the letter from her mother's hand and hardly knew whether to be pleased or disappointed when she found that the address was in the handwriting of Lady Grant. Lady Grant would of course write whether with good news or with bad. The address told her nothing, but yet she could not tear the envelope. 'Well, my dear; what is it?' said her mother. 'Why don't you open it?'

She turned a soft supplicating painful look up to her mother's face as she begged for grace. 'I will go up-stairs, mamma, and will tell you by-and-by.' Then she left the room with the letter unopened in her hand. It was with difficulty that she could examine its

contents, so apprehensive was she and yet so hopeful, so confident at one moment of her coming happiness, and yet so fearful at another that she should be again enveloped in the darkness of her misery. But she did at last persuade herself to read the words which Lady Grant had written. They were very short, and ran as follows: 'My dear Cecilia, my brother returns with me, and will at once go down to Exeter.' The shock of her joy was so great that she could hardly see what followed. 'He will hope to reach that place on the fifteenth by the train which leaves London at nine in the morning.'

That was all, but that was enough. She was sure that he would not come with the purpose of telling her that he must again leave her. And she was sure also that if he would once put himself within the sphere of

her personal influence it should be so used that he would never leave her again.

'Of course he is coming. I knew he would come. Why should he not come?' This she exclaimed to her mother, and then went on to speak of him with a wild rhapsody of joy, as though there had hardly been any breach in her happiness. And she continued to sing the praises of her husband till Mrs. Holt hardly knew how to bear her enthusiasm in a fitting mood. For she, who was not in love, still thought that this man's conduct had been scandalous, wicked, and cruel; and, if to be forgiven, only to be forgiven because of the general wickedness and cruelty of man.

It had not been without great difficulty that Lady Grant induced her brother to assent to her writing the letter which has been given above. When he had agreed to return with

her to England he had no doubt assented to her assertion that he was bound to take his wife back again, even without any confession. And this had been so much to gain, had been so felt to be the one only material point necessary, that he was not pressed as to his manner of doing it. But before they reached London it was essential that some arrangement should be made for bringing them together. 'Could not I go down to Durton,' he had said, 'and could not she come to me there?' No doubt he might have gone to Durton, and no doubt she would have gone to him if asked. She would have flown to him at Dresden, or to Jerusalem, at a word spoken by him. Absence had made him so precious to her, that she would have obeyed the slightest behest with joy as long as the order given were to bring them once more together. But of this Lady Grant was not

aware, and, had she been so, the sense of what was becoming would have restrained her.

'I think, George, that you had better go to Exeter,' she said.

'Should we not be more comfortable at Durton?'

'I think that when at Durton you will be more happy if you shall yourself have fetched her from her mother's home. I think you owe it to your wife to go to her, and make the journey with her. What is your objection?'

'I do not wish to be seen in Exeter,' he replied.

'Nor did she, you may be sure, when she returned there alone. But what does it matter? If you can be happy in once more possessing her, it cannot signify who shall

see you. There can be nothing to be ashamed of in going for your wife; nor can any evil happen to you. As this thing is to be done, let it be done in a noble spirit.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

SIR FRANCIS' ESCAPE.

When she had told the Dean's family, and Mrs. Green, and Cecilia, Miss Altifiorla began to feel that there was no longer a secret worth the keeping. And indeed it became necessary to her happiness to divulge this great step in life which she was about to take. She had written very freely, and very frequently to Sir Francis, and Sir Francis, to tell the truth, had not responded in the same spirit. She had received but two answers to six letters, and each answer had been conveyed in about three lines. There had been no expressions from him of confiding love,

nor any pressing demands for an immediate marriage. They had all been commenced without even naming her, and had been finished by the simple signature of his initials. But to Miss Altifiorla they had been satisfactory. She knew how silly she would be to expect from such an one as her intended husband long epistles such as a school girl would require, and, in order to keep him true to her, had determined to let him know how little exacting she was inclined to be. She would willingly do all the preliminary writing if only she could secure her position as Lady Geraldine. She wrote such letters, letters so full of mingled wit and love and fun, that she was sure that he must take delight in reading them. 'Easy reading requires hard writing,' she said to herself as she copied for the third time one of her epistles, and copied it studiously in such handwriting

that it should look to have been the very work of negligence. In all this she had been successful as she thought, and told herself over and over again how easy it was for a clever woman to make captive a man of mark, provided that she set herself assiduously to the task.

She soon descended from her friends to the shopkeepers, and found that her news was received very graciously by the mercantile interests of the city. The milliners, the haberdashers, the furriers and the bootmakers of Exeter received her communication and her orders with pleased alacrity. With each of them she held a little secret conference, telling each with a smiling whisper what fate was about to do for her. To even the upholsterers, the bankers, the hotel-keepers and the owners of post-horses she was communicative, making every one the gratified reci-

pient of her tidings. Thus in a short time all Exeter knew that Sir Francis Geraldine was about to lead to the hymeneal altar Miss Altifiorla, and it must be acknowledged that all Exeter expressed various opinions on the subject. They who understood that Miss Altifiorla was to pay for the supplies ordered out of her own pocket declared for the most part how happy a man was Sir Francis. But those who could only look to Sir Francis for possible future custom were surprised that the Baronet should have allowed himself to be so easily caught. And then the aristocracy expressed its opinion which it must be acknowledged was for the most part hostile to Miss Altifiorla. It was well known through the city that the Dean had declared that he would never again see his brother-in-law at the deanery. And it was whispered that the Reverend Dr. Pigrum, one of the canons, had

stated 'that no one in the least knew where Miss Altifiorla had come from.' This hit Miss Altifiorla very hard,—so much so, that she felt herself obliged to write an indignant letter to Dr. Pigrum, giving at length her entire pedigree. To this Dr. Pigrum made a reply as follows: 'Dr. Pigrum's compliments to Miss Altifiorla, and is happy to learn the name of her great grandmother.' Dr. Pigrum was supposed to be a wag, and the letter soon became the joint property of all the ladies in the Close.

This interfered much with Miss Altifiorla's happiness. She even went across to Cecilia, complaining of the great injustice done to her by the Cathedral clergymen generally. 'Men from whom one should expect charity instead of scandal, but that their provincial ignorance is so narrow!' Then she went on to remind Cecilia how much older was the Roman branch

of her family than even the blood of the Geraldines. 'You oughtn't to have talked about it,' said Cecilia, who in her present state of joy did not much mind Miss Altifiorla and her husband. 'Do you suppose that I intend to be married under a bushel?' said Miss Altifiorla grandly. But this little episode only tended to renew the feeling of enmity between the ladies.

But there appeared a paragraph in the 'Western Telegraph' which drove Miss Altifiorla nearly mad: 'It is understood that one of the aristocracy in this county is soon about to be married to a lady who has long lived among us in Exeter. Sir Francis Geraldine is the happy man, and Miss Altifiorla is the lady about to become Lady Geraldine. Miss Altifiorla is descended from an Italian family of considerable note in its own country. Her great grandmother was a Fiasco, and her great great

grandmother a Disgrazia. We are delighted to find that Sir Francis is to ally himself to a lady of such high birth.' Now Miss Altifiorla was well aware that there was an old feud between Sir Francis and the 'Western Telegraph,' and she observed also that the paper made allusion to the very same relatives whom she had named in her unfortunate letter to Dr. Pigrum. 'The vulgarity of the people of this town is quite unbearable,' she exclaimed to Mrs. Green. But when she was left alone she at once wrote a funnier letter than ever to Sir Francis. It might be that Sir Francis should not see the paragraph. At any rate she did not mention it.

But unfortunately Sir Francis did see the paragraph; and, unfortunately also, he had not appreciated the wit of Miss Altifiorla's letters. 'Oh, laws!' he had been heard to ejaculate on receipt of a former letter.

'It's the kind of thing a man has to put up with when he gets married,' said Captain McCollop, a gentleman who had already in some sort succeeded Dick Ross.

'I don't suppose you think a man ever ought to be married.'

'Quite the contrary. When a man has a property he must be married. I suppose I shall have the McCollop acres some of these days myself.' The McCollop acres were said to lie somewhere in Caithness, but no one knew their exact locality. 'But a man will naturally put off the evil day as long as he can. I should have thought that you might have allowed yourself to run another five years yet.' The flattery did touch Sir Francis, and he began to ask himself whether he had gone too far with Miss Altifiorla. Then came the 'Western Telegraph,' and he told himself that he had not gone too far.

'By G——, she has told everybody in that beastly hole,' said he. The 'beastly hole' was intended to represent Exeter.

'Of course she has. You didn't suppose but that she would begin to wear her honour and glory as soon as they were wearable.'

'She pledged herself not to mention it to a single soul,' said Sir Francis. Upon this Captain McCollop merely shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm d——d if I put up with it. Look here! All her filthy progenitors put into the newspaper to show how grand she is.'

'I shouldn't care so very much about that,' said the cautious Captain, who began to perceive that he need not be specially bitter against the lady.

'You're not going to marry her.'

'Well, no; that's true.'

'Nor am I,' said Sir Francis with an air of great decision. 'She hasn't got a word of mine

in writing to show,—not a word that would go for anything with a jury.'

'Hasn't she indeed?'

'Not a word. I have taken precious good care of that. Between you and me, I don't mind acknowledging it. But it had never come to more than that.'

'Then in fact you are not bound to her.'

'No; I am not;—not what I call bound. She's a handsome woman you know,—very handsome.'

'I suppose so.'

'And she'd do the drawing-room well, and the sitting at the top of the table, and all that kind of thing.'

'But it's such a deuced heavy price to pay,' said Captain McCollop.

'I should not have minded the price,' said Sir Francis, not quite understanding his friend's remark, 'if she hadn't made me ridiculous in

this way. The Fiascos and the Disgrazias! What the devil are they to our old English families? If she had let it remain as it was, I might have gone through with it. But as she has told all Exeter and got that stuff put into the newspapers, she must take the consequences. One is worse than another, as far as I can see.' By this Sir Francis intended to express his opinion that Miss Altifiorla was at any rate quite as bad as Cecilia Holt.

But the next thing to be decided was the mode of escape. Though Sir Francis had declared that he was not what he called bound, yet he knew that he must take some steps in the matter to show that he considered himself to be free; and as the Captain was a clever man, and well conversant with such things, he was consulted. 'I should say, take a run abroad for a short time,' said the Captain.

'Is that necessary?'

'You'd avoid some of the disagreeables. People will talk, and your relatives at Exeter might kick up a row.'

'Oh, d—— my relatives.'

'With all my heart. But people have such a way of making themselves disgusting. What do you say to taking a run through the States?'

'Would you go with me?' asked the Baronet.

'If you wish it I shouldn't mind,' said the Captain considerately. 'Only to do any good we should be off quickly. But you must write to some one first.'

'Before I start, you think?'

'Oh, yes;—certainly. If she didn't hear from you before you went, you'd be persecuted by her letters.'

'There is no end to her letters. I've quite made up my mind what I'll do about them. I

won't open one of them. After all, why should she write to me when the affair is over? You've heard of Mrs. Western, I suppose?'

'Yes; I've heard of her.'

'I didn't write to her when that affair was over. I didn't pester her with long-winded scrawls. She changed her mind, and I've changed mine; and so we're equal. I've paid her, and she can pay me if she knows how.'

'I hope Miss Altifiorla will look at it in the same light,' said the Captain.

'Why shouldn't she? She knew all about it when that other affair came to an end. I wasn't treated with any particular ceremony. The truth is, people don't look at these things now as they used to do. Men and women mostly do as they like till they've absolutely fixed themselves. There used to be duels and all that kind of nonsense. There is none of that now.'

'No; you won't get shot.'

'I don't mind being shot any more than another man; but you must take the world as you find it. One young woman treated me awfully rough, to tell the truth. And why am I not to treat another just as roughly? If you look at it all round, you'll see that I have used them just as they have used me.'

'At any rate,' said Captain McCollop, after a pause, 'if you have made up your mind, you'd better write the letter.'

Sir Francis did not see the expediency of writing the letter immediately, but at last he gave way to his friend's arguments. And he did so the more readily as his friend was there to write the letter for him. After some attempts on his own part, he put the writing of the letter into the hands of the Captain, and left him alone for an entire morning to perform the task. The letter when it was sent, after

many corrections and revises, ran as follows:—

'My dear Miss Altifiorla,—I think that I am bound in honour without a moment's delay to make you aware of the condition of my mind in regard to marriage. I ain't quite sure but what I shall be better without it altogether.'—'I'd rather marry her twice over than let my cousin have the title and the property,' said the Baronet with energy. 'You needn't tell her that,' said McCollop. 'Of course when you've cleared the ground in this quarter you can begin again with another lady.'—'I think that perhaps I may have expressed myself badly so as to warrant you in understanding more than I have meant. If so, I am sure the fault has been mine, and I am very sorry for it. Things have turned up with which I need not perhaps trouble you, and compel me to go for a while to a very distant country. I shall be

off almost before I can receive a reply to this letter. Indeed, I may be gone before an answer can reach me. But I have thought it right not to let a post go by without informing you of my decision.

'I have seen that article in the Exeter newspaper respecting your family in Italy, and think that it must be very gratifying to you. I did understand, however, that not a word was to have been spoken as to the matter. Nothing had escaped from me, at any rate. I fear that some of your intimate friends at Exeter must have been indiscreet.

'Believe me yours,

'With the most sincere admiration,

'FRANCIS GERALDINE.'

He was not able to start for America immediately after writing this, but he quitted his Lodge in Scotland, leaving no immediate

address, and hid himself for a while among his London clubs, where he trusted that the lady might not find him. In a week's time he would be off to the United States.

Who shall picture the rage of Miss Altifiorla when she received this letter? This was the very danger which she had feared, but had hardly thought it worth her while to fear. It was the one possible break-down in her triumph; but had been, she thought, so unlikely as to be hardly possible. But now on reading the letter she felt that no redress was within her reach. To whom should she go for succour? Though her ancestors had been so noble, she had no one near her to take up the cudgels on her behalf. With her friends in Exeter she had become a little proud of late, so that she had turned from her those who might have assisted her. 'The coward!' she said to herself, 'the base

coward! He dares to treat me in this way because he knows that I am alone.' Then she became angry in her heart against Cecilia, who she felt had set a dangerous example in this practice of jilting. Had Cecilia not treated Sir Francis so unceremoniously he certainly would not have dared so to treat her. There was truth in this, as in that case Sir Francis would at this moment have been the husband of Mrs. Western.

But what should she do? She took out every scrap of letter that she had received from the man, and read each scrap with the greatest care. In the one letter there certainly was an offer very plainly made, as he had intended it; but she doubted whether she could depend upon it in a court of law. 'Don't you think that you and I know each other well enough to make a match of it?' It was certainly written as an offer, and her

two answers to him would make it plain that it was so. But she had an idea that she would not be allowed to use her own letters against him. And then to have her gushing words read as a reply to so cold a proposition would be death to her. There was not another syllable in the whole correspondence written by him to signify that he had in truth intended to become her husband. She felt sure that he had been wickedly crafty in the whole matter, and had lured her on to expose herself in her innocence.

But what should she do? Should she write to him an epistle full of tenderness? She felt sure that it would be altogether ineffectual. Should she fill sheets with indignation? It would be of no use unless she could follow up her indignation by strong measures. Should she let the thing pass by in silence, as though she and Sir Francis had never known each

other? She would certainly do so, but that she had allowed her matrimonial prospects to become common through all Exeter. She must also let Exeter know how badly Sir Francis intended to treat her. To her, too, the idea of a prolonged sojourn in the United States presented itself. In former days there had come upon her a great longing to lecture at Chicago, at Saint Paul's, and Omaha, on the distinctive duties of the female sex. Now again the idea returned to her. She thought that in one of those large Western Halls, full of gas and intelligence, she could rise to the height of her subject with a tremendous eloquence. But then would not the name of Sir Francis travel with her and crush her?

She did resolve upon informing Mrs. Green. She took three days to think of it, and then she sent for Mrs. Green. 'Of all human beings,' she said, 'you, I think, are the truest

to me.' Mrs. Green of course expressed herself as much flattered. 'And therefore I will tell you. No false pride shall operate with me to make me hold my tongue. Of all the false deceivers that have ever broken a woman's heart, that man is the basest and the falsest.'

In this way she let all Exeter know that she was not to be married to Sir Francis Geraldine; and another paragraph appeared in the 'Western Telegraph,' declaring that after all Sir Francis Geraldine was not to be allied to the Fiascos and Disgrazias of Rome.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Though the news of Miss Altifiorla's broken engagement did reach Mrs. Western at St. David's, she was in a state of mind which prevented her almost from recognising the fact. It was the very day on which her husband was to come to her. And her joy was so extreme as almost to have become painful. 'Mamma,' she said, 'I shall not know what to say to him.'

'Just let him come and receive him quietly.'

'Receive him quietly! How can I be quiet when he will have come back to me?

I think you do not realise the condition I have been in during the last three months.'

'Yes, my dear, I do. You have been deserted, and it has been very bad.'

But Mrs. Western did not approve of the word used, as it carried a strong reproach against her husband. She was anxious now to take upon herself the whole weight of the fault which had produced their separation, and to hold him to have been altogether sinless. And as yet she was not quite sure that he would again take her to his home. All she knew was that he would be that day in Exeter, and that then so much might depend on her own conduct. Of this she was quite sure,—that were he to reject her she must die. In her present condition, and with the memory present to her of the dreams she had dreamed, she could not live alone at Exeter, divided from him, and there give birth to

her child. But he must surely intend to take her into his arms when he should arrive. It could not be possible that he should again reject her when he had once seen her.

Then she became fidgety about her personal appearance,—a female frailty which had never much prevailed with her,—and was anxious even about her ribbons and her dress. 'He does think so much about a woman being neat,' she said to her mother.

'I never perceived it in him, my dear.'

'Because you have not known him as I have done. He does not say much, but no one's eye is so accurate and so severe.' All this arose from a certain passage which dwelt in her remembrance, when he had praised the fit of her gown, and had told her with a kiss that no woman ever dressed so well as she did.

'I think, my dear,' continued Mrs. Holt, 'that if you wear your black silk just simply, it will do very well.'

Simply! Yes; she must certainly be simple. But it is so hard to be simple in such a way as to please a man's eye. And yet, even when the time came near, she did not dare to remain long in her bedroom lest her own maid should know the source of her anxiety. At one time she had declared that she would go down to the station to meet him, but that idea had been soon abandoned. The first kiss she would give him should not be seen by strangers.

But if she were perplexed as to how she would bear herself on the coming occasion he was much more so. It may be said of him, that through his whole journey home from Dresden he was disturbed, unhappy, and silent. And that when his sister left

him in London, and that he had nothing immediately before him but the journey down to Exeter, he was almost overwhelmed by the difficulties of the situation. His case as a man was so much worse than hers as a woman. The speaking must all be done by him, and what was there that he could say? There was still present to him a keen sense of the wrong that he had endured; though he owned to himself that the punishment which at the spur of the moment he had resolved upon inflicting was too severe,—both upon her and upon himself. And though he felt that he had been injured, he did gradually acknowledge that he had believed something worse than the truth. How to read the riddle he did not know, but there was a riddle which he had not read aright. If Cecilia should still be silent, he must still be left in the dark. But he did understand that he was to

expect no confession of a fault, and that he was to exact no show of repentance.

When the train arrived at Exeter he determined to be driven at once to the Hotel. It made him unhappy to think that everyone around him should be aware that he was occupying rooms at an inn while his wife was living in the town; but he did not dare to take his portmanteau to Mrs. Holt's house and hang up his hat in her hall as though nothing had been the matter. 'Put it into a cab,' he said to a porter as the door was opened, 'and bid him drive to the Clarence.'

But a man whose face he remembered had laid his hand upon his valise before it was well out of the railway carriage. 'Please, Sir,' said the man, 'you are to go up to the house, and I'm to carry your things. I am Sam Barnet, the gardener.'

'Very well, Sam,' said Mr. Western.

'Go on and I'll follow you.' Now, as he well knew, the house at St. David's was less than half a mile from the railway station.

He felt that his misery would be over in ten minutes, and yet for ten minutes how miserable a man he was! Whilst she was trembling with joy, a joy that was only dashed by a vague fear of his possible sternness, he was blaming his fate as it shortened by every step the distance between him and his wife. At last he had entered the path of the little garden, and the door of the house was open before him. He ventured to look, but did not see her. He was in the hall, but yet he did not see her. 'Cecilia is in the breakfast parlour,' said the voice of Mrs. Holt, whom in his confusion he did not notice. The breakfast parlour was in the back part of the house, looking out into the garden, and thither he went. The door was

just ajar and he passed in. In a second the whole trouble was over. She was in his arms at once, kissing his face, stroking his hair, leaning on his bosom, holding his arm round her own waist as though to make sure that he should not leave her; crying and laughing at the same moment. 'Oh, George, my own George! It has all been my doing; but you will forgive me! Say that one word that I am "forgiven."' Then there came another storm of kisses which frustrated the possibility of his speaking to her.

What a wife she was to possess! How graceful, how gracious, how precious were her charms,—charms in which no other woman surely ever approached her! How warm and yet how cool was the touch of her lips; how absolutely symmetrical was the sweet curve of her bust; what a fragrance came from her breath! And the light of her eyes,

made more bright by her tears, shone into his with a heavenly brightness. Her soft hair as he touched it filled him with joy. And once more she was all his own. Let the secret be what it might, he was quite sure that she was his own. As he bent down over her she pressed her cheek against his and again drew his arm tighter round her waist. 'George, if you wished to know how I love you, you have taken the right step. I have been sick for you, but now I shall be sick no longer. Oh, George, it was my fault; but say that you have forgiven me.'

He could not bring himself to speak so much of an accusation as would be contained in that word 'forgive.' How was he to pardon one whose present treatment to him was so perfect, so loving, and so lovely? 'Sit down, George, and let me tell you how it was. Of course I was wrong, but I did not mean to be wrong.'

'No, no,' he said. 'There shall be no wrong.' And yet why had not his sister told him that it would be like this? Why had she so stoutly maintained that Cecilia would confess nothing. Here she was acknowledging everything with most profuse confession. What could any man desire more? 'Do not speak of it;—at any rate now. Let me be happy as I have got you.'

Then there was another storm of kisses, but she was not to be put off from her purpose. 'You must know it all. Sit down;—there, like that.' And she seated herself, leaning back upon him on the sofa. 'Before we had been abroad I had been engaged to that man.'

'Yes;—I understand that.'

'I had been engaged to him,—without knowing him. Then when I found that he was not what I thought him, I made up my

mind that it would be better to throw him over than make us both miserable for life.'

'Certainly.'

'And I did so. I made a struggle and did it. From that time to this I have had nothing to say to him,—nor he to me. You may say that I treated him badly.'

'I don't say so. I, at any rate, do not say so.'

'My own, own man. Then we went abroad, and as good fortune would have it you came in our way. It was not long before you made me love you. That was not my fault, George. I loved you so dearly when you were telling me that story about the other girl;—but, somehow, I could not tell you then a similar story about myself. It seemed at first so odd that my story should be the same, and then it looked almost as though I were mocking you. Had you had no story

to tell, you would have known all my own before I had allowed myself to be made happy by your love. Do you not perceive that it was so?'

'Yes,' he said, slowly, 'I can understand what you mean.'

'But it was a mistake; for from day to day the difficulty grew upon me, and when once there was a difficulty, I was not strong enough to overcome it. There never came the moment in which I was willing to mar my own happiness by telling you that which I thought would wound yours. I had not dreamed beforehand how much more difficult it would become when I should once be absolutely your wife. Then your sister came and she told me. She is better than anybody in the world except yourself.'

'All women are better than I am, he said. 'It is their nature to be so.'

Some half-ludicrous idea of Miss Altifiorla and her present difficulties came across her mind, as she contradicted his assertion with another shower of kisses. 'She told me,' continued Cecilia, 'that I was bound to let you know all the truth. Of course I knew that; of course I intended it. But that odious woman was in the house, and I could not tell you till she was gone. Then he came.'

'Why did he come?'

'He had no right to come. No man with the smallest spirit would have shown himself at your door. I have thought about it again and again, and I can only imagine that it has been his intention to revenge himself. But what matter his intentions so long as they do not come between you and me? I want you to know all the truth, but not to imagine more than the truth. Since the day on which I had told him that he and I must part, there

has been no communication between us but what you know. He came to Durton and made his way into the house, and Miss Altifiorla was there and saw it all; and then you were told.'

'He is a mean brute.'

'But I am not a brute. Am I a brute? Say that I am nice once more. You know everything now,—everything, everything. I do own that I have been wrong to conceal it. My very soul should be laid bare to you.'

'Cecilia, I will never be hard to you again.'

'I do not say that you have been hard. I do not accuse you. I know that I have been wrong, and I am quite content that we should again be friends. Oh, George, just at this moment I think it is sweeter than if you had never sent me away.'

And so the reconciliation was made, and

Mr. Western and Cecilia were once more together. But no doubt to her mind, as she thought of it all, there was present the happy conviction that she had been more sinned against than sinning. She had forgiven, whereas she might have exacted forgiveness. She had been gracious, whereas she might have followed her mother's advice and have been repellent till she had brought him to her feet. As it was, her strong desire to have him once again had softened her, and now she had the double reward. She had what she wanted, and was able to congratulate herself at the same time on her virtue. But he, though he had too what he wanted, became gradually aware that he had been cruel, stiff-necked, and obdurate. She was everything that he desired, but he was hardly happy because he was conscious that he had been unjust. And he was a man that loved justice

even against himself, and could not be quite happy till he had made restitution.

He stayed a week with her at Exeter, during which time he so far recovered himself as to be able to dine at the deanery, and return Dr. Pigrum's call. Then he was to start for his own house in Berkshire, having asked Mrs. Holt to come to them a fortnight before Christmas. He would have called on Miss Altifiorla had he not understood that Miss Altifiorla in her present state of mind received no visitors. She gave it out that since men had been men and women had been women, no woman had been so basely injured as herself. But she intended to redress the wrongs of her sex by a great movement, and was devoting herself at present to hard study with that object. She used to be seen daily walking two miles and back on the Crediton Road, it being necessary to preserve her health

for the sake of the great work she had in hand. But it was understood that no one was to accost her, or speak to her on these occasions, and at other times it was well known that she was engaged upon the labours of her task.

'And to-morrow we will go back to Durton,' said Mr. Western to his wife.

'Dear Durton, how happy I shall be to see it once again!'

'And how happy I shall be to take you again to see it! But before we go it is necessary that I should say one thing.'

This he spoke in so stern a voice that he almost frightened her. Was it possible that after all he should find it necessary to refer again to the little fault which she had so cordially avowed?

'What is it, George?'

'I have made a mistake.'

'No, George, no, don't say so. There has

been no mistake. A man should own nothing. I have thought about it and am sure of it.'

'Let a man commit no fault, and then what you say will be true. I made a mistake, and allowed myself to be so governed by it as to commit a great injustice. I am aware of it, and I trust I may never repeat it. Such a mistake as that I think that I shall never commit again. But I did it, and I ask you to forgive me.' In answer to this she could only embrace him and hang upon him, and implore him in silence to spare her. 'So it has been, and I ask your pardon.'

'No, George, no; no.'

'Will you not pardon me when I ask you?'

'I cannot bring myself to say such a word. You know that it is all right between us. I cannot speak the word which you shall never

be made to hear. I am the happiest woman now in all England, and you must not force me to say that which shall in any way lessen my glory.'

THE END.

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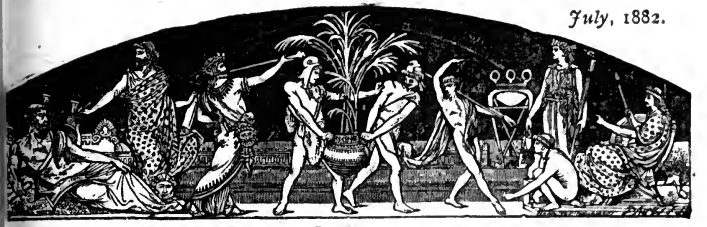

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